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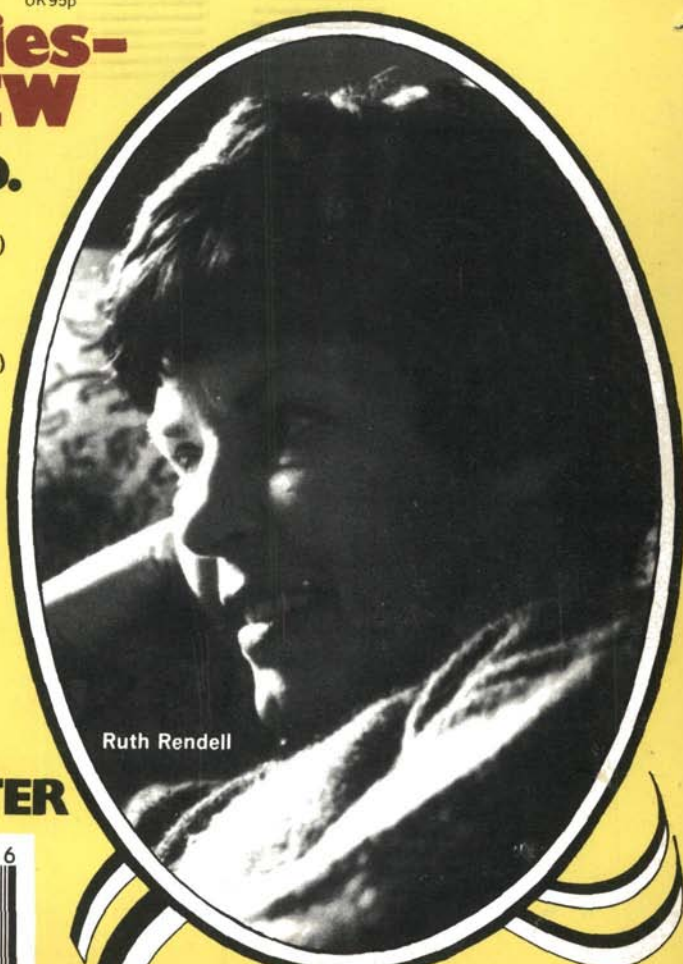
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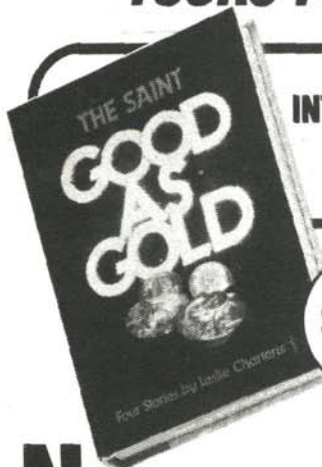
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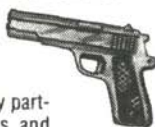
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Mystery Magazine®

A CASE OF COINCIDENCE	Ruth Rendell	5
ONE HOUR TO DOOM	Stephen Wasylyk	18
HOW I BECAME A CRIMINAL	T. M. Adams	28
THE MAN WHO PRETENDED TO LIKE BASEBALL	Isaac Asimov	33
EVENTS AT HEADLAND COTTAGE	William Bankier	47
A TIME OF SUMMING UP	Ernest Savage	57
I CAN'T GO HOME	Sylvia Tacker	74
GRAVEYARD SHIFT	E. P. Moses	79
LIKE FATHER LIKE SON	Charles R. McConnell	85
THE EDINBURGH LANDLADY	Aubrey Davidson	99
THE ADVENTURE OF THE BELLES LETTERS	Robert L. Fish	100
THE TURNING POINT	Henry T. Parry	109
A DEBT TO BE PAID	Dick Stodghill	120
THE THIRD-FLOOR CLOSET	Jack Ritchie	130
THE PROBLEM OF THE COURTHOUSE GARGOYLE	Edward D. Hoch	140
MYSTERY NEWSLETTER	Otto Penzler & Chris Steinbrunner	92
THE JURY BOX	Jon L. Breen	96
INDEX TO VOLUME SEVENTY-FIVE		161-162-32

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a **NEW** crime-detective story by

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This is the story of the Wrexlade Murders—the case of five women strangled about one month apart in 1953, between February and July. And intertwined with the details of these multiple murders is a love story—if you can call it that—one that appalled the British public. Even the famous criminologist, Miss Georgina Hallam Saul, was shocked . . .

A CASE OF COINCIDENCE

by **RUTH RENDELL**

Of the several obituaries which appeared on the death of Michael Lestrangle not one mentioned his connection with the Wrexlade murders. Memories are short, even journalists' memories, and it may be that the newspapermen who wrote so glowingly and so mournfully about him were mere babes in arms or not even born at the time. For the murders, of course, took place in the early fifties, before the abolition of capital punishment.

Murder is the last thing one would associate with the late Sir Michael, eminent cardiac specialist, physician to Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Albany, and author of that classic work, the last word on its subject, so succinctly entitled *The Heart*. Sir Michael did not destroy life, he saved it. He was as far removed from Kenneth Edward Brannel, the Wrexlade Strangler, as he was from the carnivorous spider which crept across his consulting-room window. Those who knew him well would say that he had an almost neurotic horror of the idea of taking life. Euthanasia he refused to discuss and he had opposed with all his vigor the legalizing of abortion.

Until last March when an air crash over the North Atlantic claimed him among its 200 fatalities, he had been a man one au-

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tomatically thought of as life-enhancing, as having on countless occasions defied death on behalf of others. Yet he seemed to have had no private life, no family, no circle to move in, no especially beautiful home. He lived for his work. He was not married and few knew he ever had been, still fewer that his wife had been the last of the Wrexlade victims.

There were four others and all five of them died as a result of being strangled by the outsized, bony hands of Kenneth Edward Brannel. Michael Lestrangle, by the way, had exceptionally narrow, well-shaped hands, dextrous and precise. Brannel's hands have been described as like bunches of bananas. In her study of the Wrexlade case, the criminologist Miss Georgina Hallam Saul relates how Brannel, in the condemned cell, talked about committing these crimes to a prison officer. He had never understood why he killed those women; he didn't dislike women or fear them.

"It's like when I was a kid and in a shop and there was no one about," he is alleged to have said. "I had to take something, I couldn't help myself. I didn't even do it sort of of my own will. One minute it'd be on the shelf and the next in my pocket. It was the same with those girls. I had to get my hands on their throats. Everything'd go dark and when it cleared my hands'd be round their throats and the life all squeezed out . . ."

He was 28, an agricultural laborer, illiterate, classified as educationally subnormal. He lived with his widowed father, also a farm-worker, in a cottage on the outskirts of Wrexlade in Essex. During 1953 he strangled Wendy Cutforth, Maureen Hunter, Ann Daly, and Mary Trenthyde without the police having the least suspicion of his guilt. Approximately a month elapsed between each of these murders, though there was no question of Brannel killing at the full moon or anything of that sort.

Four weeks after Mary Trenthyde's death Brannel was arrested and charged with murder, for the strangled body of Norah Lestrangle had been discovered in a ditch less than a hundred yards from his cottage.

They found him guilty of murder in November of that same year and 25 days later he was executed.

"A terrible example of injustice," Michael Lestrangle used to say. "If the M'Naghton Rules apply to anybody, they surely applied to poor Brannel. With him it wasn't only a matter of not knowing that what he was doing was wrong but of not knowing he was doing it at all till it was over. We have hanged a poor idiot who had no more

idea of evil than a stampeding animal has when it tramples on a child."

People thought it amazingly magnanimous of Michael that he could talk like this when it was his own wife who had been murdered. She was only 25 and they had been married less than three years.

It is probably best to draw on Miss Hallam Saul for the most accurate and comprehensive account of the Wrexlade stranglings. She attended the trial, every day of it, which Michael Lestrangle did not. When Prosecuting Counsel, in his opening speech, came to describe Norah Lestrangle's reasons for being in the neighborhood of Wrexlade that night, and to talk of the Dutchman and the hotel at Chelmsford, Michael got up quietly and left the court. Miss Hallam Saul's eyes, and a good many other pairs of eyes, followed him with compassion.

Nevertheless, she didn't spare his feelings in her book. Why should she? Like everyone else who wrote about Brannel and Wrexlade, she was appalled by the character of Norah Lestrangle. This was the fifties, remember, and the public were not used to hearing of young wives who admitted shamelessly to their husbands that one man was not enough for them. Michael had been obliged to state the facts to the police and the facts were that he had known for months that his wife spent nights in this Chelmsford hotel with Jan Vandeeper, a businessman on his way from The Hook and Harwich to London. She had told him so quite openly.

"Darling . . ." taking his arm and leading him to sit close beside her while she fondled his hand. "Darling, I absolutely have to have Jan, I'm crazy about him. I do have to have other men, I'm made that way. It's nothing to do with the way I feel about you, though, you do see that, don't you?" These words he didn't, of course, render verbatim. The gist was enough.

"It won't be all that often, Mike darling, once a month at most. Jan can't fix a trip more than once a month. Chelmsford's so convenient for both of us and you'll hardly notice I'm gone, will you, you're so busy at that old hospital."

But all this came much later, in the trial and in the Hallam Saul book. The first days (and the first chapters) were occupied with the killing of those four other women.

Wendy Cutforth was young, married, a teacher at a school in Ladeley. She went to work by bus from her home in Wrexlade, four miles away. In February, at four o'clock dusk, she got off the bus at Wrexlade Cross to walk to her bungalow a quarter of a mile away.

She was never seen alive again, except by Brannel, and her strangled body was found at ten that night in a ditch near the bus stop.

Fear of being out alone which had seized Wrexlade women after Wendy's death died down within three or four weeks. Maureen Hunter, who was only 16, quarreled with her boy friend after a dance at Wrexlade village hall and set off to walk home to Ingleford on her own. She never reached there. Her body was found in the small hours only a few yards from where Wendy's had been.

Mrs. Ann Daly, a middle-aged widow, also of Ingleford, had a hairdressing business in Chelmsford and drove herself to work each day via Wrexlade. Her car was found abandoned, all four doors wide-open, her body in a small wood between the villages. An unsuccessful attempt had been made to bury the body in the leaf mold.

Every man between 12 and 70 in the whole of that area of Essex was closely examined by the police. Brannel was questioned, as was his father, and was released after ten minutes, having aroused no interest. In May, 27 days after the death of Ann Daly, Mary Trenthyde, thirty-year-old mother of two small daughters and herself the daughter of Brannel's employer, Mark Stokes of Cross Farm, disappeared from her home during the course of a morning. One of her children was with its grandmother, the other in its pram just inside the garden gate. Mary vanished without trace, without announcing to anyone that she was going out or where she was going. A massive hunt was mounted and her strangled body was finally found at midnight in a disused well half a mile away.

All these deaths took place between February and July in 1953.

The Lestranges had a flat in London not far from the old Royal Free Hospital. They were not well-off but Norah had a rich father who was in the habit of giving her handsome presents. One of these, for her twenty-fifth birthday, was a Triumph Alpine sports car. Michael had a car too, the kind of thing that is called an "old banger."

As frontispiece to Miss Hallam Saul's book is a portrait photograph of Norah Lestrangle as she appeared a few months before her death. The face is oval, the features almost too perfectly symmetrical, the skin flawless and opaque. Her thick dark hair is dressed in the high fashion of the time, in short smooth curls. Her makeup is heavy and the dark greasy lipstick coats the parted lips in a way that is somehow lascivious. The eyes stare with humorless complacency.

Michael was furiously, painfully jealous of her. When, after they had been married six months, she began a flirtation with his best

friend, a flirtation which soon developed into a love affair, he threatened to leave her, to divorce her, to lock her up, to kill Tony. She was supremely confident he would do none of these things. She talked to him. Reasonably and gently and lovingly she put it to him that it was he whom she loved and Tony with whom she was amusing herself. "I *love* you, darling, don't you understand? This thing with Tony is just—fun. We have fun and then we say goodbye till next time and I come home to you where my real happiness is."

"You promised to be faithful to me," he said, "to forsake all others and keep only to me."

"But I do keep only to you, darling. You have all my love and trust and my thoughts—Tony just has this tiny share in a very unimportant aspect of me."

After Tony there was Philip. And after Philip, for a while, there was no one. Michael believed Norah might have tired of the "fun" and be settling for the real happiness. He was working hard at the time for his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons.

That fellowship he got, of course, in 1952. He was surgical registrar at a big London hospital, famous for successes in the field of cardiac surgery, when the first of the Wrexlade murders took place—the murder of Wendy Cutforth. About the time the account of that murder and of the hunt for the Wrexlade strangler appeared in the papers, Norah met Jan Vandepeer.

Michael wasn't a reader of the popular press and the Lestranges had no television set. Television wasn't, in those days, the indispensable adjunct to domestic life it has since become. Michael listened sometimes to the radio and he read *The Times*. He knew of the first of the Wrexlade murders but he wasn't much interested in it. He was busy in his job and he had Jan Vandepeer to worry about too.

The nature of the Dutchman's business in London was never clear to Michael, perhaps because it was never clear to Norah. It seemed to have something to do with commodity markets, and Michael was convinced it was shady, not quite aboveboard. Norah used to say that he was a smuggler, and she found the possibility he might be a diamond smuggler exciting. She met him on the boat coming from The Hook to Harwich after spending a week in The Hague with her parents, her father having some diplomatic post there.

"Darling, I absolutely have to have Jan, I'm crazy about him. It's nothing to do with us, though, you do see that, don't you? No one could ever take me away from you."

Vandeppeer used to come over about once a month with his car and drive down to London through Colchester and Chelmsford, spend the night somewhere, carry out his business the following day, and get the evening boat back. Whether he stayed in Chelmsford rather than London because it was cheaper or because Chelmsford, in those days, still kept its pleasant rural aspect, does not seem to be known. It hardly matters. Norah Lestrangle was more than willing to drive the 40 or so miles to Chelmsford in her Alpine and await the arrival of her dashing, blond smuggler at the Murrey Gryphon Hotel.

Chelmsford is the county town of Essex, standing on the banks of the river Chelmer and in the midst of a pleasant, though featureless, arable countryside. The land is rather flat, the fields are wide, and there are many trees and numerous small woods. Wrexlade lies some four miles to the north of the town, Ingleford a little way farther west. It was some time before the English reader of newspapers began to think of Wrexlade as anywhere near Chelmsford. It was simply Wrexlade, a place no one had heard of till Wendy Cutforth and then Maureen Hunter died there, a name on a map maybe or on a signpost till the stranglings began—and then, gradually, a word synonymous with fascinated horror.

Bismarck Road, Hilldrop Crescent, Rillington Place—who can say now, except the amateur of crime, which of London's murderers lived in those streets? Yet in their day they were names on everyone's lips. Such is the English sense of humor that there were even jokes about them. There were jokes, says Miss Hallam Saul, about Wrexlade, sick jokes for the utterance of one of which a famous comedian was banned by the BBC. Something on the lines of what a good idea it would be to take one's mother-in-law to Wrexlade . . .

Chelmsford as being so close to Wrexlade became public knowledge when Mrs. Daly died. She was last seen locking up her shop in the town center and getting into her car. It was after this that Norah said to Michael, "When I'm in Chelmsford, darling, I promise you I won't go out alone after dark."

It was presumably to be a consolation to him that if she went out after dark it would be in the company of Jan Vandeppeer.

Did Lestrangle passively acquiesce, then, in this infidelity of hers? In not leaving her, in being at the flat when she returned home, in continuing to be seen with her socially, he did acquiesce. In continuing to love her in spite of himself, he acquiesced. But his misery was terrible. He was ill with jealousy. All this time, when he was not at the hospital, when he was not snatching a few hours of sleep,

was spent in thrashing out in his mind what he should do. It was impossible to go on like this.

If he remained in her company he was afraid he would do her some violence, but the thought of being permanently parted from her was horrible. When he contemplated it he seemed to feel the solid ground sliding away from under his feet; he felt as Othello feels—"If I love thee not, chaos is come again."

In June, on Friday the 19th of June, Norah went down to Chelmsford, to the Murrey Gryphon Hotel, to spend the night with Jan Vandepeer.

Michael, who had worked every day without a break at the hospital for two weeks, had two days off, the Friday and the Saturday. He was tired almost to the point of sickness, but those two days he was to have off loomed large and glowing and inviting before him at the end of the week. He got them out of proportion. He told himself that if he could have those two days off to spend alone with Norah, to take Norah somewhere into the country and laze those two days away with her, to walk with her hand in hand down country lanes (that he thought with such maudlin romanticism is evidence of his extreme exhaustion) if he could do that, all would miraculously become well. He would explain and she would explain and they would listen to each other and in the words of the cliché, make a fresh start. Michael was convinced of all this. He was a little mad with tiredness.

After she was dead, and they came in the morning to tell him of her death, he took time off work. Miss Hallam Saul gives the period as three weeks and she is probably correct. Without those weeks of rest Michael Lestrangle would very likely have had a mental breakdown or—even worse to his way of thinking—have killed a patient on the operating table. So when it is said that Norah's death, though so terrible to him, saved his sanity and his career, this is not too far from the truth. And then, when he eventually returned to his work, he threw himself into it with total dedication. He had nothing else, you see, nothing at all but his work for the rest of the life that ended in the North Atlantic last March.

Brannel had nothing either. It is very difficult for the educated middle-class person, the kind of person we really mean when we talk about "the man in the street," to understand the lives of people like Kenneth Edward Brannel and his father. They had no hobbies, no interests, no skills, no knowledge in their heads, virtually no friends. Old Brannel could read. Tracing along the lines with his

finger, he could just about make out the words in a newspaper. Kenneth Brannel could not read at all. These days they would have television, not then.

Romantic town-dwellers imagine such as the Brannels tending their cottage gardens, growing vegetables, occupying themselves with a little carpentry or shoemaking in the evenings, cooking country stews and baking bread. The Brannels, who worked all day in another man's fields, would not have dreamed of further tilling the soil in the evenings. Neither of them had ever so much as put up a shelf or stuck a sole on a boot. They lived on tinned food and fish and chips, and when darkness came down they went to bed. There was no electricity in their cottage, anyway, and no running water or indoor sanitation. It would never have occurred to Mr. Stokes of Cross Farm to provide these amenities or to the Brannels to demand them.

Downstairs in the cottage was a living room with a fireplace and a kitchen with a range. Upstairs was old Brannel's room into which the stairs went, and through the door from this room was the bedroom and only private place of Kenneth Edward Brannel. There, in a drawer in the old wooden-knobbed tallboy, unpolished since Ellen Brannel's death, he kept his souvenirs: Wendy Cutforth's bracelet, a lock of Maureen Hunter's red hair, Ann Daly's green silk scarf, Mary Trenthyde's handkerchief with the lipstick stain and the embroidered *M*. The small square handbag mirror was always assumed to have been the property of Norah Lestrangle, to be a memento of her, but this was never proved. Certainly, there was no mirror in her handbag when her body was found.

In Miss Hallam Saul's *Wrexlade Monster* there are several pictures of Brannel—a snapshot taken by his aunt when he was ten, a class group at Ingleford Middle School (which he should never, with his limitations, have been allowed to attend), a portrait by a Chelmsford photographer that his mother had taken the year before her death. He was very tall, a gangling bony man with a bumpy, tortured-looking forehead and thick, pale, curly hair. The eyes seem to say to you: the trouble is that I am puzzled, I am bewildered, I don't understand the world or you or myself and I live always in a dark mist. But when, for a little, that mist clears, look what I do . . .

His hands, hanging limply at his sides, are turned slightly, the palms half showing, as if in helplessness and despair.

Miss Hallam Saul includes no picture of Sir Michael Lestrangle, MD, FRCS, eminent cardiac specialist, author of *The Heart*, Phy-

sician to Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Albany, professor of cardiology at St. Joachim's Hospital. He was a thin, dark young man in those days, slight of figure and always rather shabbily dressed. One would not have given him a second glance. Very different he was then from the Sir Michael who was mourned by the medical élite of two continents and whose austere yet tranquil face with its sleek silver hair, calm light eyes, and aquiline features appeared on the front pages of the world's newspapers. He changed more than most men change in 27 years. It was a total metamorphosis, not merely an aging.

At the time of the murder of his wife Norah he was 26. He was ambitious but not inordinately so. The ambition—the vocation, one might well call it—came later, after she was dead. He was worn out with work on June 19th, 1953, and he was longing to get away to the country with his wife and to rest.

"But, darling, I'm sure I told you. I'm going to meet Jan at the Murrey Gryphon. I did tell you, I never have any secrets from you, you know that. It was you who didn't tell me you were going to have two days off. How was I to know? You never seem to take time off these days and I do like to have *some fun sometimes*."

"Don't go," he said.

"But, darling, I want to see Jan."

"It's more than I can bear, the way we live," he said. "If you won't stop seeing this man I shall stop you."

He buried his face in his hands and presently she came and laid a hand on his shoulder. He jumped up and struck her a blow across the face. When she left for Chelmsford to meet Jan Vandeppeer she had a bruise on her cheek which she did her best to disguise with makeup.

They had a message for her at the hotel when she got there, from her "husband" in Holland to say he had been delayed at The Hook. Hotels, in those days, were inclined to be particular that couples who shared bedrooms should at least pretend to be husband and wife. It was insinuated at Brannel's trial that Jan Vandeppeer failed to arrive on this occasion because he was growing tired of Norah, but there was no evidence to support this. He was genuinely delayed and unable to leave.

Why didn't she go back to London? Perhaps she was afraid to face Michael. Perhaps she hoped Vandeppeer would still come, since the phone message had been received at 4:30. She dined alone and went out for a walk. To pick up a man, insisted Prosecuting Counsel,

though he was not prosecuting *her* and the Old Bailey is not a court of morals. Nobody saw her go and no one seems to have been sure where she went. Eventually, of course, to Wrexlade.

Brannel also went out for a walk. The long light evenings disquieted him because he could not go to bed and he had nothing to do but sit with his father while the old man puzzled out the words in the evening papers. Brannel went first to his bedroom to look at and handle the secret things he kept there, the scarf and the lock of hair and the bracelet and the handkerchief with *M* on it for Mary Trenthyde, and then he went out for his walk. Along the narrow lanes, to stop sometimes and stand, to lean over a gate, or to kick a pebble aimlessly ahead of him, dribbling it slowly from side to side of the long, straight, lonely road.

Did Norah Lestrangle walk all the way to Wrexlade or did someone give her a lift and for reasons unknown abandon her there? She could have walked, it is no more than two miles from the Murrey Gryphon to the spot where her body was found half an hour before midnight. Miss Hallam Saul suggests that she was friendly with a second man in the Chelmsford neighborhood, and in the absence of Vandepeer, set off to meet him that evening. Unlikely though that seems, similar suggestions were put forward in court. It was as if they all said, a woman like that, a woman so immoral, so promiscuous, so lacking in all proper, decent feeling, a woman like that will do anything.

Her body was found by two young Wrexlade men going home after an evening spent at the White Swan on the Ladeley-Wrexlade road. They phoned the police from the call box on the opposite side of the lane, and the first place the police went to, because it was the nearest place, the nearest habitation, was the Brannells' cottage. Norah Lestrangle's body lay half hidden in long grass on the verge by the bridge over the river Lade, and the Brannells' home, Lade Cottage, was a hundred yards the other side of the bridge. They went there initially only to ask the occupants if they had seen or heard anything untoward that evening.

Old Brannel came down in his nightshirt with a coat over it. He hadn't been asleep when the police came, he said, he had been awakened a few minutes before by his son coming in. The detective superintendent looked at Kenneth Edward Brannel, at his huge dangling hands, as he stood leaning against the wall, his eyes bewildered, his mouth a little open. No, he couldn't say where he had been, round and about, up and down, he couldn't say more.

They searched the house, although they had no warrant. Much was made of this by the defense at the trial. In Kenneth Brannel's bedroom, in the drawer of the tallboy, they found Wendy Cutforth's bracelet, Maureen Hunter's lock of red hair, Ann Daly's green silk scarf, and the handkerchief with *M* on it for Mary Trenthyde. The Wrexlade Monster had been caught at last. They cautioned Brannel and charged him and he looked at them in his puzzled way and said, "I don't think I killed the lady. I don't remember. But maybe I did, I forget things and it's like a mist comes up . . ."

Michael Lestrangle was told of the death of his wife in the early hours of the morning. Their purpose in coming to him was to tell him the news and ask him if he would later go with them to Chelmsford formally to identify his wife's body. They asked him no questions and would have expressed their sympathy and left him in peace had he not declared that it was he who had killed Norah and that he wanted to make a full confession.

They had no choice after that but to drive him at once to Chelmsford and take a statement from him. No one believed it. The detective chief superintendent in charge of the case was very kind to him, very gentle but firm.

"But if I tell you I killed her you must believe me. I can prove it."

"Can you, Dr. Lestrangle?"

"My wife was constantly unfaithful to me—"

"Yes, so you have told me. And you bore with her treatment of you because of your great affection for her. The truth seems to be, Doctor, that you were a devoted husband and your wife—well, a less than ideal wife."

Michael Lestrangle insisted that he had driven to Chelmsford in pursuit of Norah, intending to appeal to Jan Vandeppeer to leave her alone. He had not gone into the hotel. By chance he had encountered her walking aimlessly along a Chelmsford street as he was on his way to the Murrey Gryphon.

"Mrs. Lestrangle was still having her dinner at the time you mention," said Chief Superintendent Masters.

"What does that matter? It was earlier or later, I can't be precise about times. She got into the car beside me. I drove off, I don't know where, I didn't want a scene in the hotel. She told me she had to get back, she was expecting Vandeppeer at any moment."

"Vandeppeer had sent her a message he wasn't coming. She didn't tell you that?"

"Is it important?" He was impatient to get his confession over.

"It doesn't matter what she told me. I can't remember what we said."

"Can you remember where you went?"

"Of course I can't. I don't know the place. I just drove and parked somewhere, I don't know where, and we got out and walked and she drove me mad, the things she said, and I got hold of her throat and . . ." He put his head in his hands. "I can't remember what happened next. I don't know where it was or when. I was so tired and I was mad, I think." He looked up. "But I killed her. If you'd like to charge me now, I'm quite ready."

The chief superintendent said very calmly and stolidly, "That won't be necessary, Dr. Lestrangle."

Michael Lestrangle shut his eyes momentarily, clenched his fists, and said, "You don't believe me."

"I quite believe you believe it yourself, Doctor."

"Why would I confess it if it wasn't true?"

"People do, sir. It's not uncommon. Especially people like yourself who have been overworking and worrying and not getting enough sleep. You're a doctor, you know what the psychiatrists would say, that you had a reason for doing violence to your wife so that now she's dead your mind has convinced itself you killed her, and you're feeling guilt for something you had nothing to do with."

"You see, Doctor, look at it from our point of view. Is it likely that you, an educated man, a surgeon, would murder anyone? Not very. And if you did, would you do it in Wrexlade? Would you do it a hundred yards from the home of a man who has murdered four other women? Would you do it by strangling with the bare hands which is the method that man always used? Would you do it four weeks after the last strangling which itself was four weeks after the previous one? Coincidences like that don't happen, do they, Dr. Lestrangle? But people do get overtired and suffer from stress so that they confess to crimes they never committed."

"I bow to your superior judgment," said Michael Lestrangle.

He went to the mortuary and identified Norah's body and then he made a statement to the effect that Norah had gone to Chelmsford to meet her lover. He had last seen her at four o'clock on the previous afternoon.

Brannel was found guilty of Norah's murder, for he was specifically charged only with that, after the jury had been out half an hour. And in spite of the medical evidence as to his mental state he was condemned to death and executed a week before Christmas.

For the short time after that execution that capital punishment

remained law, Michael Lestrangle was bitterly opposed to it. He used to say that Brannel was a prime example of someone who had been unjustly hanged and that this must never be allowed to happen in England again. Of course there was never any doubt that Brannel had strangled Wendy Cutforth, Maureen Hunter, Ann Daly, and Mary Trenthyde. The evidence was there and he repeatedly confessed to these murders.

But that was not what Michael Lestrangle meant. People took him to mean that a man must not be punished for committing a crime whose seriousness he is too feeble-minded to understand. This is the law, and there can be no exceptions to it merely because society wants its revenge. People took Michael Lestrangle to mean that when he spoke of injustice being done to this multiple killer.

And perhaps he did.

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One hour—one short hour—or one interminable hour, depending on how you look at it—to doom . . . a zinger of a story that will literally keep you on the edge of your chair . . .

ONE HOUR TO DOOM

by **STEPHEN WASYLYK**

His face was the face of a million men, the color and elasticity long gone with his youth, the hollows and lines etched by uncounted disappointments and lost dreams. He was wearing a baggy blue work shirt and shapeless trousers that dragged over scuffed boots.

His name was Sellers and he sat in the hard wooden chair, his left hand on my desk and his right hand pressed close to his abdomen as if he had a stomachache—but the stomachache was mine, not his.

I lifted my phone and dialed Mandola's number. Through the plate-glass window that allowed him to overlook the squad room, I saw him press the phone to his ear.

"Lieutenant, this is Cole," I said. "Can you come out here, please?"

His eyes rose to fix on mine, his round face blank. Because I had called him lieutenant instead of Mandola, he knew something was up. "Anything I can do, Cole?"

"I certainly hope so."

He left his office and stood before my desk, impressively large and almost intimidating, his face impassive.

"This is Mr. Sellers," I said. "He's the father of the Sellers girl."

Mandola looked at Sellers. "I'm sorry about your daughter, Mr. Sellers."

1980 by Stephen Wasylyk.

"Mr. Sellers has asked that the man we arrested as responsible for her death be brought here," I said.

Mandola shook his head.

"We can't do that."

"I explained that to him but he insists."

Sellers half turned and looked up at Mandola, and Mandola saw the position of his right hand and the strong cord looped around his wrist, curling through his fingers and disappearing inside his shirt.

"He insists?"

I kept my tone conversational, as if this was something that happened every day. "Mr. Sellers is wearing a belt filled with explosives beneath his shirt and the cord in his right hand is attached to a firing mechanism. Unless we do as he asks, he says he will blow up this room. All he has to do is pull the cord an inch."

Mandola never blinked. "I see."

Sellers had a deep grating voice. "Tell him, Sergeant Cole."

"Mr. Sellers was a demolition expert in the Army and has worked in construction since, so he has both the capability and the access to explosives."

Sellers might be crazy and one step away from blowing us all to Kingdom Come, but you couldn't tell it from Mandola's noncommittal official voice.

"You realize, Mr. Sellers, that neither Sergeant Cole nor I has the authority to bring the man here. The case has gone beyond us and is now in the hands of the District Attorney."

"Get the authority," said Sellers. "I don't want to hurt any of you people, but I will if that's the way you want it. You just do what is necessary. I'm in no hurry but I don't want to wait all day. If he's not here by two o'clock, I pull the cord and me and Sergeant Cole both go up."

"I suggested that there is no necessity for anyone else to be in the building," I said. "Mr. Sellers agrees that one hostage is enough."

Mandola's eyes widened briefly. "I'll see to it."

He spoke quietly to Alzado and went to his office. Alzado walked over to Hendricks and whispered to him.

One by one the men in the squad room left. No one hurried. Only one or two glanced at Sellers.

Sellers and I sat in the center of the empty room, isolated in a sea of battered oak desks. In his office Mandola spoke quietly into the phone.

"I have to do this, Cole," said Sellers.

"Like hell you do," I said casually.

Mandola came back. "The Commissioner and the District Attorney want to see me."

He was lying. Neither the Commissioner nor the D.A. would want any part of this. Both would have said the same thing: *We'll give you all the help you need, Mandola, but it's your problem.*

Sellers nodded. "All right. I don't care if you go, but don't try anything funny. I'll tell you what I told Cole. Everything is fine as long as I don't move my right hand."

"No one is going to try anything funny, Mr. Sellers," said Mandola.

"And don't bring anyone back with you, like one of those psychiatrists to talk me out of it. I know exactly what I'm doing. You come through that door alone or with the creep I want or I pull the cord."

"You're calling the shots, Mr. Sellers," said Mandola.

The squad room was very quiet. My palms were sweating. I wondered how much slack there was in that cord threaded through Sellers' fingers.

"I want him," he said defensively. "This is the only way to get him."

"So we hand him to you and you pull the cord and you're both dead. Who wins?"

His shoulders lifted. "Makes no difference. I'm a Class A loser." His eyes found mine. They were blank, as though he really wasn't talking to me at all but to a mirror image that could give him no argument. The skin along my spine crawled. If he wasn't here with me, then I had no chance to get through to him.

"A loser. It took me a long time to figure that out," he said slowly. "I've always worked hard and minded my own business. That's the way to win, right? So when my wife left, I told myself it could happen to anyone and it had nothing to do with me. When the foreman's job opened up and they gave it to Davis, I told myself I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Then my kid wanted to go to college and I found out that I didn't have enough money and those damned banks wouldn't lend me any because I didn't have enough collateral. So she had to depend on scholarships, but she couldn't get one for the college she really wanted, so she had to settle for what she could get. If I had the money, she would have been far from here and that creep would never have had the chance to kill her, so it's all my fault, you see. What do you live for if not to help your kid? I always thought I did all right, but now I can see I'm a real loser."

Keep him talking, I thought, until Mandola can think of something.

"In one way or another we're all losers," I said. "When I joined the force, I was sure that some day I would be Commissioner."

Still looking at himself in that unseen mirror, he gave no indication he had even heard me.

He straightened suddenly, his voice wistful. "What's the answer, Cole?"

"Who says there is one?"

He glanced at the clock. "One hour. They've got one hour to get him here. Are you sure that lieutenant understood that?"

I wasn't sure of anything except that I didn't want his right hand to move. How long could a man hold it in that position before it developed a cramp or twitched? I could feel sweat collecting on my forehead.

"When they bring him, you can walk out, Cole. I'll give you three minutes to get outside. You can go a long way in three minutes."

"That's nice of you," I said. "Very fair. But suppose they don't bring him?"

"They'll bring him. They don't want you to die."

"Don't be too sure. A middle-aged sergeant who sometimes gives them more trouble than he's worth isn't that valuable."

"They'll bring him," he said stubbornly. "They'd better, or we both go, Cole. I mean it. I've been a loser too long. Not this time."

The building had never been so quiet, even in the early hours before dawn. The noise of the traffic outside was gone because they had blocked off the street. Sellers and I sat in the center of the silence.

"So you solve all your problems by blowing yourself up," I said.

He shrugged. "I do one good thing. I take the creep with me. Not for me. For her. She deserves that much."

"What makes you think that's what she would want?"

For the first time his voice rose. "*Can I ask her? Tell me that, Cole! Can I ask her?*"

I held up a soothing hand. "Take it easy. Get excited and your hand moves and you blow both of us up for no good reason."

He wiped his face with his left hand. The hand dropped to grasp his right wrist. The thought that his right hand was getting tired in that position made me sweat a little more.

"When you walked in here, you had your choice of eight men. What made you pick me?"

"You looked sensible, like a guy who wouldn't get excited and give me trouble. I picked right."

The clock on the wall was humming low, time running.

Footsteps sounded in the hall and Mandola came through the door.

Sellers twisted carefully, his eyes wary.

"I spoke to the District Attorney," said Mandola. "He doesn't have the authority to send the man here. Only a judge can do that. We'll need more time."

"No more time," said Sellers harshly. "I told you two o'clock. You have forty-five minutes left. You have a choice. When I drop this hand, I take the creep with me or I take Cole."

Mandola glanced at me.

I shrugged. "You said it. Mr. Sellers is calling the shots."

"I'll be back," said Mandola.

His footsteps receding down the hall left me with the loneliest feeling I'd ever had.

"He'd better bring him," said Sellers, as if to himself. His eyes found mine.

"You scared, Cole?"

"Hell, yes. The thought of dying has always scared *me* even if you're looking forward to it."

The lips twisted. "Once you've been there, it's not so bad. I always figured I was on borrowed time after the war anyway, and then six months ago—"

His voice trailed off and he sat there, the words driven off by the memory. I waited.

"I almost bought it then, you know." He lifted his left hand and wobbled it. "Few more minutes and it would have been done."

"What happened?"

"Heart. They saved me. I never understood why. Six weeks I was in that hospital. Don't ask me why it didn't give out when the cop brought me the news about my girl. Shock like that should kill any man. Couldn't understand that, either. Now I know."

"What do you know?"

"I was meant to do this, to go this way."

"Sure. The doctors saved you just so you could blow yourself up today. They'll dance when they hear it."

"I don't need jokes, Cole."

"Would you like me to cry?"

He looked at the clock. "Half hour."

Beyond him, through the window, a dark figure with a rifle moved on the roof of the building across the street.

Now how in hell is that going to help? I thought.

Yet there was reassurance in that figure. It meant that around us, even if we could neither see nor hear them, Mandola was moving men into position. But not one of them could ever get close enough to do anything about that right hand pressed to Sellers' stomach.

My eyes fastened on his right hand. It was large and square, with blunt fingertips and wrinkled skin, the hand of a man who had used it to earn a hard living; but now it was something more. He said he was in the construction business which meant that hand had been used to create, to build. Now, unless I could get through to him, it would be used to destroy.

"What made you pick this way?" I asked. "Why not something simple, like a gun?"

"I don't know anything about guns. I don't even know where to get one. Besides, I could miss or maybe hit him and not kill him." He shook his head. "This way is sure. I sit him down and tell him why he's going to die, and then—"

"He could survive."

He smiled a twisted smile. "Nothing in this room will survive."

I sat there wondering what Mandola could do to help. Sellers couldn't be rushed or picked off by that rifleman across the street. I decided Mandola could do nothing because whatever was to be done had to be done right here, and the only weapon I had was to keep him talking.

My damp shirt clung to my back.

"Think about yourself, Sellers. Do you really want to die?"

"I told you. I'm dead anyway."

"People who have had heart attacks have been known to live for years."

"Maybe they had something to live for."

"And you have no one."

"All I had was my daughter."

"You have no friends?"

"None who care if I live or die."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it."

I waved a hand. "Do you mean to tell me there isn't one person out there who will say I wish Sellers hadn't done that?"

"Not one."

"And it doesn't matter that the people who know you will say that Sellers must have been crazy?"

"What do they have to do with me?" He shifted in his chair. His right hand moved slightly and my skin crawled.

"Suppose," I said thoughtfully, "suppose I said I didn't believe you had explosives wrapped around you."

"Then why would I want him brought to me?"

I couldn't argue with that. I didn't want to argue with that. The clock read 1:45. Fifteen minutes to go.

I told myself there must be some way to get through to him, to end this insanity.

I leaned back and clasped my hands on top of my head.

His mouth twisted. "You look like a prisoner, Cole."

"Isn't that what I am?"

"Take your hands down."

I lowered them.

"You understand there is nothing personal in this. You're probably a nice guy."

"I could be a friend. You say no one cares whether you live or die. I do."

"Only because if I live, you live."

"No. Because every day I see people die unnecessarily. If you see enough of that, you know that life is a precious thing. Not just your own, but everyone else's. I don't want to see you die. I want to see you leave here and be like the rest of the people—"

"Forget it. I've spent too many days and nights thinking about it and this is the way it has to be for me. I'm not leaving here. It ends here."

That dead expression was back.

No way, I thought. No way to reach him at all, no way to light a fire in those eyes.

The clock read ten minutes. My back muscles felt tied in knots. Where the hell was Mandola?

Sellers was as aware of the time as I was, even though he said nothing. The lined face acquired a look of deep resignation and sorrow.

My mind was blank. I could think of nothing more to say. There was nothing anyone could say to Sellers. If he had shown some emotion, I might have been able to pick up a reaction, but his responses were wooden and resigned, and there was no way to reach a man who already considered himself dead.

Footsteps were coming down the hall.

Mandola.

He came into the room casually, nodding at Sellers. "Just wanted to let you know, Mr. Sellers, we're still working on it. The judge with jurisdiction—"

"You're stalling." Sellers' voice was lifeless. "Get out."

Mandola glanced at me.

I jerked my head at the door.

"Cole," he said. "I—"

"Do as he asks."

Sellers stood. "Get out or I drop my hand now."

"Go," I said.

Mandola hesitated.

"You want to die, too, Lieutenant?"

"Listen," said Mandola, "there's no reason for this."

"Sure," said Sellers. "I gave you the reason. Now unless you want to go up with me and Cole—"

I knew Mandola. I knew he wouldn't walk out and leave me there unless I gave him some sort of sign that I could handle the situation. I winked.

He backed out reluctantly, the wink not entirely reassuring. I knew how he felt but he had no choice but to let me do it my way, hoping I had some sort of miracle up my sleeve. But I had no miracle. I simply couldn't see any sense in his dying with us.

"They won't bring him, will they, Cole?" asked Sellers.

We were down now to the end of it, with only the low hum of the clock to keep us company, and I wondered if that was the last thing I would ever hear.

I took a deep breath. "No. They *can't* bring him. No one has the authority or the power to order that man here so that you can kill him. Anyone who did would be as guilty as you. I'm sorry but all this has been a waste of time."

The clock hummed for long seconds.

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "I can see that now. It seemed so easy when I thought of it but now I know I should have gone to where he is and forced my way in."

"That wouldn't have worked either. There are things that no one can allow you to do, no matter what it costs them. So there is no sense in your pulling that cord when all you'll do is kill both of us, and you have no reason to do that."

He passed his left hand over his face and stared down at the floor.

All he needed from deep in that despondency and resignation was an impulse and we'd both die.

A simple to-hell-with-it-all impulse.

A twitch of his right hand.

And a construction worker named Sellers and a tired detective named Cole would be nothing more than names in the newspaper.

There was absolutely nothing I could do about it. He was just far enough away from me so that I couldn't reach him before that right hand moved.

I stared at it. It rested against his stomach, just a hand, an ordinary hand, curved to hold the cord, and slightly cupped to hold my life.

His head lifted. Tears glistened in his eyes. "I told you I was a loser, Cole. I couldn't even do this right. Get out of here. I said I'd give you three minutes and I will."

I stood. I could feel my clothes clinging to my wet body.

"Sure," I said. "I understand. It's your life."

I took a step as if to pass him, then whirled, my right hand clamping on his right wrist, my left arm sweeping around him and pinning his arm to his side. His upper right arm was pressed against my chest and I held his right wrist immobile.

I yelled, "*MANDOLA!*"

Sellers twisted and turned, veins in his neck and forehead bulging with the effort, but he was shorter than I was and I held him off the floor, depriving him of leverage, the weight of his body pressing against me and helping to keep that right hand in place.

Inches from mine, his contorted face held eyes that cursed me and I could feel that right wrist of his slipping through my sweating palm.

Two men dressed in bomb-squad protective clothing came through the door at a run, which took a lot of guts because they had no way of knowing if I could hold him until they reached me. They knew exactly what to do. One wrapped his arms around Sellers, helping me immobilize him. The other darted around to the front, one big paw joining mine in locking Sellers' hand in place, the other pulling his shirt aside as gently as possible.

At that moment my tight throat and cold stomach told me that none of us would live more than a few seconds later.

Sellers suddenly stiffened and moaned, his neck muscles rigid, his mouth open. He groaned in pain and strained against us.

I knew what was happening, yet I couldn't let him go, not until

the man from the bomb squad had cut the cord and removed that belt from his waist.

Fighting for the life he had been so willing to give up only moments before, he had forgotten the bomb around his waist and was now twisting against the agony bursting in his chest.

The eyes were no longer cursing but pleading.

"Hold on," I said hoarsely. "Hold on."

An explosives man slowly pulled a thick, wide canvas belt from beneath Sellers' shirt and headed for the door on feet that glided as though he wore skates, the belt cradled in his hands as if it was the most precious thing in the world.

I helped lower Sellers to the desk, yelling for a rescue unit, even though I knew it was too late.

My legs were trembling. I held my right hand out before me, the one that had kept Sellers from setting off those explosives. It was curled into a claw, shaking uncontrollably, and I wondered if the shaking would ever stop.

Sellers had wanted to die and he was dead, not in the ear-shattering finale that would have been his protest against the way life had treated him, but instead fearfully and still frustrated even at the end.

And in a world where few things made sense, you could say I killed him because I wanted to prevent him from killing himself, which made absolutely no sense at all.

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A clever and amusing short-short . . .

HOW I BECAME A CRIMINAL

by T. M. ADAMS

I needed the money, of course. My wife had decided to anticipate the trend and replace her entire wardrobe with an equivalent number of jogging outfits. The tie-in products for my kids' favorite movie had come to include fifty-piece plastic reproductions of the key scenes and an electronic game that doubled our energy bill. My car had developed strange cravings, demanding transmission fluid by the quart, and would soon present me with a healthy repair bill. Consequently, when I recognized Ed Tucker's face in the photograph, I knew what I had to do.

Ed worked three desks away from me in Accounting. He always kept to himself, and he looked surprised when I approached him one afternoon as he ate lunch. I showed him the two-year-old magazine I'd filched from my dentist's office. It was folded open to the prison-break article.

"I want to talk to you, Ed," I said.

He kept eating his sandwich. "No one can hear us," he said.

"I think the police would like to know where they could find the man in this picture, don't you, Ed?"

He burped. "There's no reward, if that's what you're thinking," he said blandly.

"I was thinking more of a personal subsidy. Something like twenty dollars a week."

"Ten."

"Twenty."

"No, just ten," he said, shrugging. "That's five hundred and twenty a year. Take it or leave it. Turn me in and you get nothing."

"That's a pretty irresponsible attitude to take toward your own freedom, Ed."

"Well, I'm a pretty irresponsible sort of guy," Ed said, shaking his head. "What the prison psychologists call a 'borderline schizo-

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phrenic.' It's been the blight of my life, let me tell you—irresponsibility. Why, I'm even thinking of cutting my offer to five bucks."

"I'll accept ten," I said hurriedly.

"You'll have to take a check," he said.

"Hey, come on, Ed—"

"I never carry more than carfare in cash," Ed said. "I'm afraid of being ripped off. I just don't trust people, that's my problem. Incipient paranoia. You'll have to take a check or forget the whole thing."

I took his check, that week and every week for six months. It didn't make much difference, financially. The weekend after my wife bought a gold lamé jogging outfit (for formal wear), I visited Ed at his apartment.

"I've got to have more money, Ed."

"No, sorry. Gave at the office."

"I mean it, Ed. Ten dollars is the same as nothing nowadays. If I'm going to go under anyway, I might as well have the satisfaction of turning you in."

"That's sort of the way I feel, George. If you sent me back to prison, I just know I'd turn you in for extortion."

I laughed politely. "That's pretty feeble, Ed, and you know it."

He scratched his head. "I don't see how you can say that, George, since I have all those canceled checks made out to you, and that incriminating picture of me with your fingerprints on it. If you could explain why you didn't turn me in right off, maybe you could pass off those payments as something else, but you can't. That's about as open-and-shut as a blackmail case ever gets. And there's no way you'd get a break for squealing. Remember, I'd be remanded to another state, which wouldn't help any lawman's career around here very much; but you'd be tried locally, a sure boost for the D.A.'s conviction rate."

I had no reply—perhaps I should say, "no defense."

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "You'll keep getting your ten bucks a week. It's worth it to me."

I didn't know what he meant by that until a few weeks later, when he called me up at two in the morning. His voice was slurred but assured.

"Look, George, I'm at a pay booth on the corner of Honeysuckle and Fifth," he said. "I'd like you to come over right away and give me a lift home."

"Are you crazy? Do you know what time it is?"

"Here's the problem, George. I need a car, fast. The police are

looking for a man on foot. If they catch me, the fingerprint check will put me back in prison, and I'll expose you as a blackmailer. I've been paying protection to you for six months, and now it's time for you to deliver. Honeysuckle and Fifth, pronto." He hung up before I could ask him anything else.

In the car he explained further. "What it is, George, a few buddies of mine from the old days blew into town this afternoon. Well, we were making a night of it, and about eleven we thought—what the hell—why not knock over something for old times' sake? You know that jewelry store on Main that doesn't bother with steel shutters, I guess 'cause they're only two blocks away from the police station? Well, we just kicked in the window, filled our pockets, and ran away into the park; split up and lost them. Piece of cake. I haven't had so much fun in—turn left here, George, we've got to pick up my buddies. Hey. You always go over the curb that way?"

After we dropped off his friends, I let him know that ten dollars a week wasn't enough for this kind of protection. I told him he might as well stop paying me, because all bets were off.

He seemed to accept this. "Yeah, I can see this isn't really your line—that was a red light, you know—and it's not really mine, either. There's got to be a better way, all right."

A few weeks later he found it.

I was sitting at my office desk, considering various schemes for restoring my household to solvency. (The best: to buy the kids a ten-speed bike for Christmas, use it myself until they were big enough to reach the pedals, and do without a car in the meantime.) Ed appeared next to me and leaned over. "Uh, George," he said in a confidential tone, "I thought I'd better tell you, my accounts will be short fifty dollars this week. You'll have to figure out some way to cover it up."

I gaped at him. "Fifty dollars?"

He smiled and nodded. "I bet it on a horse. So be sure to finagle it on this week's balance sheet."

"No way, Ed," I said firmly. I'd half expected something like this, and had my speech all prepared. "You take your chances and I'll take mine. I can't believe that little extortion charge would amount to much, anyway. It would only be a first offense."

He frowned. "I don't know about your blackmail racket, or your failure to report an escaped prisoner, but your complicity in a twenty-thousand-dollar jewelry-store robbery is a major crime. Add them all together and you've got quite a record. Have you ever

thought of psychoanalysis? Might give you some insight into why you do these things. It's changed my life, I can tell you . . . Hey, look, a measly fifty dollars!"

The next week it was a hundred, and when I tried to refuse he reminded me that I was now additionally an embezzler.

After that the weeks flew by. Sometimes Ed bet, sometimes he didn't. If he ever won, he sure didn't plow the money back into the company. I was forced to explore hitherto unknown territory on the dark side of accounting. Once I survived a cursory audit, I began to dip into the till myself. (The bicycle project had never come off, of course. Worse, my wife had finally tried jogging once or twice, had decided she didn't care for it, and expected a new wardrobe for summer.)

Worried about my own defalcations, I gingerly approached Ed and asked if he could hold himself down to a fixed sum a week. He made a hopeless gesture and said, "No, it seems to be a compulsive thing. I have to make bigger and bigger plays every time. A classic case, you know?"

Finally there came a Friday when Ed took off early, before I could see his paperwork. I waded through the bewildering pile of dummy invoices, postponed payments, and priority disbursement slips with mounting trepidation. A quick personal trip to the company vault confirmed my suspicions: Ed had bled off the entire next month's payroll, in cash. I tried to reach him at his apartment, but was told that his phone service had lapsed a few days before. I knew what that meant.

I spent the afternoon getting the best price I could for my car, and walked home. I told the family I was having the muffler repaired. Later that night, while my wife tossed and turned in her sleep (for weeks she had been having nightmares—prophetic, I now see—in which she was forced to jog to market) I visited the kids' room. They had fallen asleep in front of the television, no doubt exhausted by the prospect of buying everything they saw advertised. Tenderly, I removed their digital watches and tiptoed out of the room. After cleaning out our wall safe, I hiked off toward the bus station, never looking back.

The police, or maybe just the newspapers, decided that I was the mastermind who got most of the money, and their grossly inflated estimate of my booty kept me on the front pages for a few days. However, neither this nor the actual scantiness of my stake pre-

vented me from making a fresh start as an assistant bookkeeper in another city. Talent will out.

I miss my wife and kids, of course—not to mention my car. But I think I could probably submerge my grief in the shallow life of a swinging bachelor, if only I could afford somewhat flashier clothes, a more opulent apartment. A month ago I ordered some back numbers of a true-crime magazine carrying my picture, and I've distributed these in a number of local doctors' and dentists' offices, where some co-worker of mine is bound to see one eventually.

I know it's wrong, but I need the money.

INDEX TO VOLUME SEVENTY-FIVE—JAN. 14-JUNE 30, 1980

(continued from page 162)

REVESZ, ETTA: The Look-Alike Murders	May 5	20
RITCHIE, JACK: The Way To Do It	Jan. 14	6
The Third-Floor Closet	June 30	130
ROBERTS, JOHN STORM: It's a Long Flight to L. A.	June 2	93
ROOS, KELLEY: Death Is a Trouper	May 5	38
SAVAGE, ERNEST: A Time of Summing Up	June 30	57
SCHANCER, LOLA: Only One Way	May 5	29
SCHRADER, DIANA: The Cartière Cross	Jan. 14	78
SCHULZE, PATRICIA L.: Darkening Shadows	Apr. 7	42
SILVERSTEIN, MARK: Murder on the Mat	June 2	107
SIMPSON, DOROTHY: Boxes Within Boxes	Mar. 10	136
SMITH, WILLIAM F.: His Own Executioner	May 5	37
STEINBRUNNER, CHRIS: Bloody Visions	Jan. 14-June 30	
STODGHILL, DICK: A Debt To Be Paid	June 30	120
STOUT, REX: The Next Witness	Feb. 11	25
STRIEBY, VIRGIL: Change of Address	Mar. 10	42
X Marks the Unknown Spot	June 2	84
SUTER, JOHN F.: The Angel's Hair	Apr. 7	29
The Fairy Ring	June 2	71
TACKER, SYLVIA: I Can't Go Home	June 30	74
TALLEY, CECIL: The Farmer in the Well	Mar. 10	89
TWOHY, ROBERT: Down This Mean Street	Jan. 14	123
A Very Ordinary Murder	May 5	63
WALSH, THOMAS: Old Killeen's Promise	Jan. 14	31
WASYLYK, STEPHEN: One Hour to Doom	June 30	18
WEAVER, ROBERT WAYNE: Hide and Seek	Apr. 7	41
WEISS, JEANETTE: Homes, Sweet Homes	June 30	108
WELLEN, EDWARD: Death Dance	Mar. 10	22
In Old Edinburgh	Apr. 7	85
WILSON, HAYES: Please, No Strawberries	Mar. 10	43
YOUNG, ALAN K.: The Secret Fate of Fitchew	Jan. 14	16

A NEW Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

You are an invisible observer at a Black Widowers banquet. You are sipping an invisible brandy when the guest of the evening presents his problem—and a curious one it is this month. Darius Just, a writer, had a strange and puzzling experience in which he did something—but he doesn't know quite what he did, or why . . .

**THE MAN WHO PRETENDED
TO LIKE BASEBALL**

by ISAAC ASIMOV

The hits and outs of baseball did not, as a rule, disturb the equanimity (or lack of it) of a Black Widowers banquet. None of the Black Widowers was a sportsman in the ordinary sense of the word, although Mario Gonzalo was known to bet on the horses on occasion.

Over the rack of lamb, however, Thomas Trumbull brushed at his crisply waved white hair and said, "I've lost all interest in baseball. Once they started shifting franchises, they broke up the kind of loyalties you inherited from your father. I was a New York Giants fan when I was a young man, as was my father before me. The San Francisco Giants are strangers to me and as for the Mets, well, they're just not the same."

"There are still the New York Yankees," said Geoffrey Avalon, deftly cutting meat away from bone and bending his dark eyebrows in concentration on the task, "and in my own town we still have the Phillies, though we lost the Athletics."

"Chicago still has both its teams," said Mario Gonzalo, "and there are the Cleveland Indians, the Cincinnati Reds, the St. Louis—"

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"It's not the same," said Trumbull. "Even if I were to switch to the Yankees, half of the teams they play are teams that Lou Gehrig and Bill Dickey never heard of. And now you have each league in two divisions, with playoffs before the World Series, which becomes almost anticlimactic, and a batting average of .290 marks a slugger. Hell. I remember when you needed .350 if you were to stand a chance at cleanup position."

Emmanuel Rubin listened with the quiet dignity he considered suitable to his position as host—at least, until his guest turned to him and said, "Is Trumbull a baseball buff, Manny?"

At that, Rubin reverted to his natural role and snorted loudly. His sparse beard bristled. "Who, Tom? He may watched a baseball game or two on TV, but that's about it. He thinks a double is two jiggers of Scotch."

Gonzalo said, "Come on, Manny, you think a pitcher holds milk."

Rubin stared at him fixedly through his thick-lensed spectacles, and then said, "It so happens I played a season of semi-pro baseball as shortstop in the late 1930's."

"And a shorter stop—" began Gonzalo, then stopped and reddened.

Rubin's guest grinned. Though Rubin was only five inches above the five-foot mark, the guest fell three inches short of that. He said, "I'd be an even shorter stop if I played."

Gonzalo, with a visible attempt to regain his poise, said, "You're harder to pitch to when you're less than average height, Mr. Just. There's that."

"You're heavily underestimated in other ways, too, which is convenient at times," agreed Just. "And, as a matter of fact, I'm not much of a baseball buff myself. I doubt if I could tell a baseball from a golf ball in a dim light."

Darius Just looked up sharply at this point. "Waiter," he said, "if you don't mind, I'll have milk rather than coffee."

James Drake, waiting expectantly for his own coffee, said, "Is that just a momentary aberration, Mr. Just, or don't you drink coffee?"

"Don't drink it," said Just. "Or smoke, or drink alcohol. My mother explained it all to me very carefully. If I drank my milk and avoided bad habits, I would grow up to be big and strong; so I did—and I didn't. At least, not big. I'm strong enough. It's all very unAmerican, I suppose, not liking baseball. At least you can fake liking baseball, though that can get you in trouble, too—here's the milk. How did that get there?"

Gonzalo smiled. "That's our Henry. Noiseless and efficient."

Just sipped his milk contentedly. His facial features were small but alive and his eyes seemed restlessly aware of everything in the room. His shoulders were broad, as though they had been made for a taller man, and he carried himself like an athlete.

Drake sat over his coffee, quiet and thoughtful, but when Rubin clattered his water glass with his spoon, the quiet ended. Drake's hand was raised and he said, "Manny, may I do the honors?"

"If you wish." Rubin turned to his guest, "Jim is one of the more reserved Black Widowers, Darius, so you can't expect his grilling to be a searching one. In fact, the only reason he's volunteering is that he's written a book himself and he wants to rub shoulders with another writer."

Just's eyes twinkled with interest. "What kind of book, Mr. Drake?"

"Pop science," said Drake, "but the questions go the other way. —Henry, since Mr. Just doesn't drink, could you substitute ginger ale for the brandy. I don't want him to be at a disadvantage."

"Certainly, Dr. Drake," murmured Henry, that miracle of waiters, "if Mr. Just would like that. With all due respect, however, it does not seem to me that Mr. Just is easily placed at a disadvantage."

"We'll see," said Drake. "Mr. Just, how do you justify your existence?"

Just laughed. "It justifies itself to me now and then when it fills me with gladness. As far as justification to the rest of the world is concerned, that can go hang. —With all due respect, as Henry would say."

"Perhaps," said Drake, "the world will go hang even without your permission. For the duration of this evening, however, you must justify your existence to *us* by answering our questions. Now, I have been involved with the Black Widowers for more than half of a reasonably lengthy existence and I can smell out remarks that are worth elaboration. You said that you could get in trouble if you faked the liking of baseball. I suspect you did once, and I would like to hear about it."

Just looked surprised, and Rubin said, staring at his brandy, "I warned you, Darius."

"You know the story, do you, Manny?" said Drake.

"I know there is one but I don't know the details," said Rubin. "I warned Darius we'd have it out of him."

Just picked up the caricature that Mario Gonzalo had drawn of

him. There was a face-splitting grin on it and arms with prodigious biceps were lifting weights.

"I'm not a weightlifter," he said.

"It doesn't matter," said Gonzalo. "That is how I see you."

"Weightlifting," said Just, "slows you. The successful attack depends entirely on speed."

"You're not being speedy answering my question," said Drake, lighting a cigarette.

"There is a story," said Just.

"Good," said Drake.

"But it's an unsatisfactory one. I can't supply any rationale, any explanation—"

"Better and better. Please begin."

"Very well," said Just—

I like to walk. It's an excellent way of keeping in condition, and one night I had made my goal the new apartment of a friend I hadn't seen in a while. I was to be there at 9 P.M., and it was a moderately long walk by night, but I don't much fear the hazards of city streets in the dark though I admit I do not seek out particularly dangerous neighborhoods.

However, I was early, and a few blocks from my destination I stopped at a bar. As I said, I don't drink, but I'm not an absolute fanatic about it and I will, on rare occasions, drink a Bloody Mary.

There was a baseball game on the TV when I entered, but the sound was turned low, which suited me. There weren't many people present, which also suited me. Two men sat at a table against the wall, and a woman on a stool at the bar.

I took the stool next but one to the woman, and glanced at her briefly after I ordered my drink. She was reasonably pretty, reasonably shapely, and entirely interesting. Pretty and shapely are all right—what's not to like?—but interesting goes beyond that and it can't be easily described. It's different for each person, and she was interesting in my frame of reference.

Among my abstentions, women are not included. I even speculated briefly if it were absolutely necessary that I keep my appointment with my friend, who suffered under the disadvantage, in the circumstances, of being male.

I caught her eye just long enough before looking away. Timing is everything and I am not without experience. Then I looked up at the TV and watched for a while. You don't want to seem too eager.

She spoke. I was rather surprised. I won't deny I have a way with women, despite my lack of height, but my charm doesn't usually work *that* quickly. She said, "You seem to understand the game." It was just make-talk. She couldn't possibly know my relationship with baseball from my glazed-eye stare at the TV set.

I turned, smiled, and said, "Second nature. I live and breathe it."

It was a flat lie, but if a woman leads, you go along with the lead.

She said, rather earnestly, "You really understand it?" She was looking into my eyes as though she expected to read the answer on my retina.

I continued to follow and said, "Dear, there isn't a move in the game I can't read the motivations of. Every toss of the ball, every crack of the bat, every stance of the fielder, is a note in a symphony I can hear in my head." After all, I'm a writer: I can lay it on.

She looked puzzled. She looked at me doubtfully, then, briefly, at the men at the table. I glanced in their direction, too. They didn't seem interested—until I noticed their eyes in the wall mirror. They were watching our reflection.

I looked at her again and it was like a kaleidoscope shifting and suddenly making sense. She wasn't looking for a pickup, she was scared. It was in her breathing rate and in the tension of her hands.

And she thought I was there to help her. She was expecting someone and she had spoken to me with that in mind. What I answered was close enough—by accident—to make her think I might be the man, but not close enough for her to be sure of it.

I said, "I'm leaving soon. Do you want to come along?" It sounded like a pickup, but I was offering to protect her if that was what she wanted. What would happen afterward—well, who could tell?

She looked at me unenthusiastically. I knew the look. It said: you're five-foot-two; how can *you* help me?

It's a chronic underestimate that plays into my hands. Whatever I do is so much more than they expect that it assumes enormous proportions. I'm the beneficiary of a low base-line.

I smiled. I looked in the direction of the two men at the table, let my smile widen, and said, "Don't worry."

There were containers of cocktail amenities just behind the bar where she sat. She reached over for the maraschino cherries, took a handful, and twisted the stems off; then one by one she flicked them broodingly toward me, keeping her eyes fixed on mine.

I didn't know what her game was. Perhaps she was just considering whether to take a chance on me and this was a nervous habit

she always indulged in when at a bar. But I always say: Play along.

I had caught four and wondered how many she would flick at me, and when the barman would come over to rescue his supply; then my attention shifted.

One of the men who had been seated was now between the woman and myself, and was smiling at me without humor. I had been unaware of his coming. I was caught like an amateur, and the kaleidoscope suddenly shifted again. That's the trouble with kaleidoscopes—they keep shifting.

Sure the woman was afraid. She wasn't afraid of the men at the table. She was afraid of *me*. She didn't think I was a possible rescuer; she thought I was a possible spoiler. So she kept my attention riveted while one of her friends got in under my guard—and I had let it happen.

I shifted my attention to the man now, minutes after I should have done so. He had a moon face, dull eyes, and a heavy hand. That heavy hand, his right one, rested on my left hand on the bar, pinning it down.

He said, "I think you're annoying the lady, chum."

He underestimated me, too.

You see, I've never been any taller than I am now. When I was young I was, in point of fact, smaller and slighter. When I was 19, I would have had to gain five pounds to be a 96-pound weakling.

The result you can guess. The chivalry and sportsmanship of young people are such that I was regularly beaten up, to the cheers of the multitude. I did not find it inspiring.

From 19 on, therefore, I subscribed to build-yourself-up courses. I struggled with chest expanders. I took boxing lessons at the Y. Bit by bit I've studied every one of the martial arts. It didn't make me any taller, not one-half inch, but I grew wider and thicker and stronger. Unless I run into a brigade, or a gun, I don't get beaten up any more.

So the fact that my left arm was pinned did not bother me. I said, "Friend, I don't like having a man hold my hand, so I think I will have to ask you to remove it." I had my own right hand at eye-level, palm up, something that might have seemed a gesture of supplication.

He showed his teeth and said, "Don't ask anything, pal. *I'll* ask."

He had his chance. You must understand that I don't fight to kill, but I do fight to maim. I'm not interested in breaking a hold; I want to be sure there won't be another one.

My hand flashed across between us. Speed is of the essence, gentlemen, and my nails scraped sideways across his throat en route, as the arc of my hand brought its edge down on his wrist. *Hard!*

I doubt that I broke his wrist that time, but it would be days, perhaps weeks, before he would be able to use that hand on someone else as he had on me. My hand was free in a moment. The beauty of the stroke, however, was that he could not concentrate on the smashed wrist. His throat had to be burning and he had to be able to feel the stickiness of blood there. It was just a superficial wound, literally a scratch, but it probably frightened him more than the pain in his wrist did.

He doubled up, his left hand on his throat, his right arm dangling. He was moaning.

It was all over quickly, but time was running out. The second man was approaching, so was the bartender, and a newcomer was in the doorway. He was large and wide and I was in no doubt that he was a member of the charming group I had run into.

The risks were piling up and the fun flattening out, so I walked out rapidly—right past the big fellow, who didn't react quickly enough, but stood there, confused and wondering, for the five seconds I needed to push past and out.

Somehow I didn't think they'd report the incident to the police. Nor did I think I'd be followed, but I waited for a while to see. I was on a street with row houses, each with its flight of steps leading to the main door well above street level. I stepped into one of the yards and into the shadow near the grille work door at the basement level of a house that had no lights showing.

No one came out of the barroom. They weren't after me. They weren't sure who I was and they still couldn't believe that anyone as short as I am could be dangerous. It was the providential underestimate that has done so well for me countless times.

So I moved briskly along on my original errand, listening for the sound of footsteps behind me or the shifting of shadows cast by the street lights.

I wasn't early any longer and I arrived on the corner where my friend's apartment house was located without any need for further delay. The green light glimmered and I crossed the street, and then found matters were not as straightforward as I had believed.

The apartment house was not an only child but was a member of a large family of identical siblings. I had never visited the complex before and I wasn't sure in which building I was to find my friend.

There seemed no directory, no kiosk with a friendly information guide. There seemed the usual assumption underlying everything in New York that if you weren't born with the knowledge of how to locate your destination, you had no business having one.

The individual buildings each had its number displayed, but discreetly—in a whisper. Nor were they illuminated except by the glint of the street lights, so finding the right building was an adventure.

One tends to wander at random at first, trying to get one's bearings. Eventually I found a small sign with an arrow directing me into an inner courtyard with the promise that the number I wanted was actually to be found there.

Another moment and I would have plunged in when I remembered that I was, or just conceivably might be, a marked man. I looked back in the direction from which I had come.

I was spared the confusion of crowds. Even though it was not long after 9 P.M., the street bore the emptiness characteristic of night in any American city of the Universal Automobile Age. There were automobiles, to be sure, in an unending stream, but up the street I had walked I could see only three people in the glow of the street lights—two men and a woman.

I could not see faces, or details of clothing, for though I have 20/20 vision I see no better than that. However, one of the men was tall and large and his outline was irresistibly reminiscent of the man in the doorway whom I had dodged past in leaving the bar.

They had been waiting for him, of course, and now they had emerged. They would probably have come out sooner, I thought, but there had been the necessity of taking care of the one I had injured and, I supposed, they had left him behind.

Nor, I gathered, were they coming in search of me. Even from a distance I could tell their attention was not on something external to the group, as though they were searching for someone. Attention was entirely internal. Each of the two men was on the side of the woman and they were hurrying her along. It seemed to me that she was reluctant to move, that she held back, that she was being urged forward.

And once again the kaleidoscope shifted. She was a woman in distress after all. She had thought I was her rescuer and I had left her cold—and still in distress.

I ran across the avenue against the lights, dodging cars, and racing toward them. Don't get me wrong. I am not averse to defending myself; I rather enjoy it as anyone would enjoy something he does

well. Just the same I am not an unreasoning hero. I do not seek out a battle for no reason. I am all for justice, purity, and righteousness, but who's to say which side, if either, in any quarrel represents those virtues.

A personal angle is something else, and in this case I had been asked for help and I had failed.

Oh, I admit I had honestly decided the woman was not on my side and had needed no help, but I hadn't stayed to find out. It was that large man I was ducking, and I had to wipe that out.

At least that's what I decided in hot blood. If I'd had time to think, or to let the spasm of outrage wear off, I might have just visited my friend. Maybe I would have called the police from a street phone without leaving my name and *then* visited my friend.

But it *was* hot blood, and I ran toward trouble, weighing the odds very skimpily.

They were no longer on the street, but I had seen which gate they had entered, and they had not gone up the steps. I chased into the front yard after them and seized the grille work door that led to the basement apartment. It came open but there was a wooden door beyond that did not. The window blinds were down but there was a dim light behind them.

I banged at the wooden door furiously but there was no answer. If I had to break it down, I would be at a disadvantage. Strength, speed, and skill are not as good at breaking down a door as sheer mass is, and mass I do not have.

I banged again and then kicked at the knob. If it were the wrong apartment, it was breaking and entry, which is what it also was if it were the right apartment. The door trembled at my kick, but held. I was about to try again, wondering if some neighbor had decided to get sufficiently involved to call the police—when the door opened. It was the large man—which meant it was the right apartment.

I backed away. He said, "You seem uncomfortably anxious to get in, sir." He had a rather delicate tenor voice and the tone of an educated man.

I said, "You have a woman here. I want to see her."

"We do not have a woman here. She has us here. This is her apartment and we are here by her invitation."

"I want to see her."

"Very well, then, come in and meet her." He stepped back.

I waited, weighing the risks—or I tried to, at any rate; but an unexpected blow from behind sent me staggering forward. The large

man seized my arm and the door closed behind me.

Clearly, the second man had gone one floor upward, come out the main door, down the stairs, and behind me. I should have been aware of him, but I wasn't. I fall short of superman standards frequently.

The large man led me into a living room. It was dimly lit. He said, "As you see, sir—our hostess."

She was there. It was the woman from the bar but this time the kaleidoscope stayed put. The look she gave me was unmistakable. She saw me as a rescuer who had failed her.

"Now," said the large man, "we have been polite to you although you treated my friend in the bar cruelly. We have merely asked you in when we might have hurt you. In response, will you tell us who you are and what you are doing here?"

He was right. The smaller man did not have to push me in. He might easily have knocked me out, or done worse. I presume, though, that they were puzzled by me. They didn't know my part in it and they wanted to find out.

I looked about quickly. The smaller man remained behind me, moving as I did. The large man, who must have weighed 250 pounds, with little of it actually fat, remained quietly in front of me. Despite what happened in the bar, they still weren't afraid of me. It was, once again, the advantage of small size.

I said, "This young woman and I have a date. We'll leave and you two can continue to make yourself at home here."

He said, "That is no answer, sir."

He nodded and out of the corner of my eye I saw the smaller man move out. I lifted my arms to shoulder level as he seized me about the chest. There was no use allowing my arms to be pinned if I could avoid it. The smaller man held tightly, but it would have taken more strength than he had at his disposal to break my ribs. I waited for the correct positioning and I hoped the large man would give it to me.

He said, "I do need an answer, sir, and if I do not get one very quickly, I will have to hurt you."

He came closer, one hand raised to slap.

What followed took less time than it takes to explain, but it went something like this. My arms went up and back, and around the smaller man's head to make sure I had a firm backing, and then my feet went up.

My left shoe aimed at the groin of the large gentleman and the

man doesn't live who won't flinch from that. The large man's hips jerked backward and his head automatically bent downward and encountered the heel of my right shoe moving upward. It's not an easy maneuver, but I've practised it many times.

As soon as my heel made contact, I tightened my arm grip and tossed my head backward. My head and that of the smaller man made hard contact and I didn't enjoy it at all, but the back of my head was not as sensitive as the nose of the man behind me.

From the woman's point of view, I imagine, there could be no clear vision of what had happened. One moment I seemed helplessly immobilized and then, after a flash of movement, I was free, while both of my assailants were howling.

The smaller man was on the floor with one hand over his face. I stamped on one ankle hard to discourage him from attempting to get up. No, it was not Marquis of Queensberry rules, but there were no referees around.

I then turned to face the larger man. He brought his hands away from his face. I had caught him on the cheekbone and he was bleeding freely. I was hoping he had no fight left in him, but he did. With one eye rapidly puffing shut, he came screaming toward me in a blind rage.

I was in no danger from his mad rush as long as I could twist away, but once he got a grip on me in his present mood I would be in serious trouble. I backed away, twisted. I backed away, twisted again. I waited for a chance to hit him again on the same spot.

Unfortunately I was in a strange room. I backed away, twisted, and fell heavily over a hassock. He was on me, his knee on my thighs, his hands on my throat, and there was no way I could weaken that grasp in time.

I could hear the loud thunk even through the blood roaring in my ears and the large man fell heavily on me—but his grip on my throat had loosened. I wriggled out from below with the greatest difficulty though the woman did her best to lift him.

She said, "I had to wait for him to stop moving." There was a candleholder lying near him, a heavy wrought-iron piece.

I remained on the floor, trying to catch my breath. I gasped out, "Have you killed him?"

"I wouldn't care if I did," she said, indifferently, "but he's still breathing."

She wasn't exactly your helpless heroine. It was her apartment, so she knew where to find the clothesline, and she was tying both

of them at the wrists and ankles very efficiently. The smaller man screamed when she tightened the ropes at his ankle, but she didn't turn a hair.

She said, "Why the hell did you mess up the response in the bar when I asked you about baseball? And why the hell didn't you bring people with you? I admit you're a pint-sized dynamo, but couldn't you have brought *one* backup?"

Well, I didn't really expect gratitude, but—

I said, "Lady, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know about the baseball bit, and I don't go about in squadrons."

She looked at me sharply. "Don't move. I'm making a phone call."

"The police?"

"After a fashion."

She went into the other room to call. For privacy, I suppose. She trusted me to stay where I was and do nothing. Or thought me stupid enough to do so. I didn't mind. I wasn't through resting.

When she came back she said, "You're not one of us. What *was* that remark about baseball?"

I said, "I don't know who us is, but I'm not one of anybody. My remark about baseball was a remark. What else?"

She said, "Then how—you had better leave. There's no need for you to be mixed up in this. I'll take care of everything. Get out and walk some distance before you hail a taxi. If a car pulls up at this building while you're within earshot, don't turn around and for God's sake don't turn back."

She was pushing and I was out in the yard when she said, "But at least you knew what I was telling you in the bar. I am glad you were about and waiting."

At last gratitude! I said, "Lady, I don't know what—" but the door was closed behind me.

I made it over very quickly to my friend's apartment. He said nothing about my being an hour late or being a little the worse for wear, and I said nothing about what had happened.

And what did happen was nothing. I never heard a thing. No repercussions. And that's why it's an unsatisfactory story. I don't know who the people were, what they were doing, what it was all about. I don't know whether I was helping the good guys or the bad guys, or whether there were any good guys involved. I may have bumped into two competing bands of terrorists playing against each other.

But that's the story about my faking a knowledge of baseball . . .

When Just was finished, a flat and rather unpleasant silence hung over the room, a silence that seemed to emphasize that for the first time in living memory a guest had told a rather long story without ever having been interrupted.

Finally Trumbull heaved a weary sigh and said, "I trust you won't be offended, Mr. Just, if I tell you that I think you are pulling our leg. You've invented a very dramatic story for our benefit, and you've entertained us—me, at least—but I can't accept it."

Just shrugged; he didn't seem offended. "I've embroidered it a little, polished it up a bit—I'm a writer, after all—but it's true enough."

Avalon cleared his throat. "Mr. Just, Tom Trumbull is sometimes hasty in coming to conclusions but in this case I am forced to agree with him. As you say, you're a writer. I'm sorry to say I have read none of your works but I imagine you write what are called hard-boiled detective stories."

"As a matter of fact, I don't," said Just, with composure. "I have written four novels that are, I hope, realistic, but are not unduly violent."

"It's a fact, Geoff," said Rubin, grinning.

Gonzalo said, "Do you believe him, Manny?"

Rubin shrugged. "I've never found Darius to be a liar, and I know *something* happened, but it's hard for a writer to resist the temptation to fictionalize for effect. Forgive me, Darius, but I wouldn't swear to how much of it was true."

Just sighed. "Well, just for the record, is there anyone here who believes I told you what actually happened?"

The Black Widowers sat in an embarrassed silence, and then there was a soft cough from the direction of the sideboard.

"I hesitate to intrude, gentlemen," said Henry, "but despite the over-romantic nature of the story, it seems to me there is a very good chance it is true."

"A chance?" said Just, smiling. "Thank you, waiter."

"Don't underestimate the waiter," said Trumbull. "If he thinks there is a chance the story is true, I'm prepared to revise my opinion.—What's your reasoning, Henry?"

"If the story were fiction, Mr. Trumbull, it would be neatly tied up. This one has an interesting loose end which, if it makes sense, cannot be accidental.—Mr. Just, at the end of the story you told us the woman remarked at her relief that you knew what she was telling you in the bar. What had she told you?"

Just said, "This is a loose end, because she didn't tell me a damn thing. I could easily make something up, if I weren't telling the truth."

"Or you could let it remain loose now," said Halsted, "for the sake of verisimilitude."

Henry said, "And yet if your story is accurate, she may indeed have told you something, and the fact that you don't know what she told you is evidence of its truth."

"You speak in riddles, Henry," said Just.

Henry said, "You did not, in your story, mention precise locations—neither the location of the bar nor of the apartment complex in which your friend lives. There are a number of such apartment complexes in Manhattan."

"I know," interposed Rubin. "I live in one of them."

"Yours, Mr. Rubin," said Henry, "is on West End Avenue. I suspect that the apartment complex of Mr. Just's friend is over on First Avenue."

Just looked astonished. "It is. But how did you know that?"

Henry said, "Consider the opening scene of your story. The woman at the bar knew she was in the hands of her enemies and would not be allowed to leave except under escort. The two men in the bar were merely waiting for their large confederate. They would then take her to her apartment for reasons of their own. The woman thought you were one of her group, felt you could do nothing in the bar, but wanted you on the spot, near her apartment, with reinforcements.

"She therefore flicked maraschino cherries at you—an apparently harmless and, possibly, flirtatious gesture, though even that roused the suspicions of the two men in the bar."

Just said, "What of that?"

Henry said, "She had to work with what she could find. The cherries were small spheres—little balls—and she threw you four, one at a time. You had claimed to be a baseball fanatic. She threw you four balls, and in baseball parlance four balls—that is, four pitches outside the strike zone—means the batter may advance to first base. More colloquially, he 'walks to first.' That's what she was telling you and you, quite without understanding this, did indeed walk to First Avenue for reasons of your own."

Just looked stupefied. "I never thought of that."

"It's because you didn't and yet incorporated the incident into the account," said Henry, "that I think your story is true."

The Lord's Prayer says, "Lead us not into temptation," but the situation at Headland Cottage made temptation irresistible . . .

EVENTS AT HEADLAND COTTAGE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

When Alexander Hewson arrived at the cottage unexpectedly from Canada, Derek Jennings was delighted. He remembered the fun they had shared back in Montreal when they attended McGill University. In those days Sandy Hewson was known as "Two Lunch" because of the way he would go a second time through the cafeteria line. The extra food did not cause a weight problem. On summer afternoons on the lawn fronting Sherbrooke Street, in the shade of the new library building, Hewson tossed and caught a football, looking lean and handsome in dark blue shorts and tank top.

Derek's twin sister Lottie was always around. At age 19, more adventurous than her brother, Lottie had moved away from home and established her own apartment on Durocher, not far from the University. It was to this somewhat rundown but well-stocked hide-away that she and Sandy Hewson would go when he became tired of football and felt the need of a shower.

"You off then, Two Lunch?" Derek would call to his friend's departing back.

"Catch you later at the Pam-Pam," Hewson would reply across his shoulder, making for the slender figure of Lottie Jennings stationed like a figure in a landscape beyond the campus fence.

It was no surprise to anyone when Hewson and Lottie decided to get married. It happened a couple of years after graduation when he was an assistant professor of English at Sir George Williams, Montreal's smaller and less-prestigious college, and she was working as a sub-editor for a publishing firm which was part of her father's commercial empire.

© 1980 by William Bankier.

Derek was still in town at the time pretending to be dedicated to the aims and objectives of the clients he served at an advertising agency that employed him as a copywriter. The job was a sinecure since Jennings Electronics was the agency's largest account. So life went on for Derek and Lottie and Sandy during these post-school years with no problem more pressing than whether to drink two wines with their dinner of homemade lasagna or only one.

The event that changed everything was the death of the old man. The Jennings twins had never lacked for money; now they had more than they would ever spend. Derek threw in his job at the agency, gave a month of farewell parties in his 16th-floor flat overlooking the city and the river, then set sail for Southampton. It was a good move. Seeing England for the first time, he fell in love with every aspect of it from the graffiti anarchy of the London Underground to the hiss of the waves on Brighton beach. He spent day after day on British Rail trains traveling across the green and yellow counties to one city after another, and he adored them all—Oxford, Canterbury, Winchester, Bath, Norwich, even Liverpool.

His favorite part of the country turned out to be Cornwall and here he settled near a village with the picturesque name of Mousehole (on the first afternoon he was taught to say Mowsle). It was a lucky day for a local estate agent when Derek Jennings came in looking for a house and ready to pay cash. Headland Cottage had been on the books for three years and seemed destined to stay there with property prices sky-high and mortgage money hard to find.

But here out of the blue was this courteous Canadian with stars in his eyes and a limitless supply of dollars. Moreover, all the disadvantages of Headland Cottage such as archaic plumbing and inadequate heating and something Derek had never heard of called "rising damp" were to the prospective owner simply opportunities for improvement. He signed the papers, made out a few checks, moved in, and began hiring builders from Penzance down the road.

Inside of a year—fast going by English standards—the cottage was restored with central heating, three modern bathrooms, and ceramic cylinders in the foundation to cure the rising damp. The new squire settled down to enjoy the quiet life with walks on the moors, much staring at the sea, pints every day in the snug at The Turk's Head, and a weekly trans-Atlantic telephone call to Lottie back in Montreal.

For a month or two, after the responsibilities of the cottage conversion were off his back, Derek enjoyed his carefree existence. Then

he began to experience boredom and he said as much to Old Crowther, his drinking companion at the pub.

"What you need is a little shop to look after," Crowther said. "A place to go, days."

Derek had never considered becoming a shopkeeper. "I never thought of a shop," he said.

"Quiet this time of year. Busy in tourist season." Old Crowther put his nose into his dark ale and took it out again. "Get somebody to look after it for you. Come and go when you feel the need."

Two days later Derek asked his companion if he knew of such a place. Old Crowther did—a shop specializing in pottery and ceramics made by local craftsmen, and the owner willing to sell. Located a cough and a spit from the harbor. And yes, Old Crowther himself would take on the job of tending it.

The arrangements were made within three months, Derek operating once again with his astonishing North American speed. Old Crowther established himself behind the counter and kept the place full of his cronies who came for their daily chats.

So Derek Jennings was settled and satisfied in the southwest of England. But what of sister Lottie, living with Two Lunch Hewson back in Montreal? The regular telephone calls made it clear that all was not well. "I think he's going crazy, Derek," she said one evening. "Yesterday he actually had a fist fight with a first-year student in an early English class. They were discussing Beowulf and the kid disagreed with Sandy's interpretation and then they were on the floor pounding each other."

"I don't like the sound of that."

A month went by and the telephone bulletins did not bring better news. "He isn't here," Lottie informed her brother. "He hasn't been here for two nights."

"I *certainly* don't like the sound of that," Derek said.

"Actually it's okay," Lottie said. "Sandy has been so disruptive this past year. Now that he's staying away, I've begun working again and I love it. I'm putting together a book of Canadian birds, all those lovely Lansdowne water colors."

It was against this setting of marital imperfection at home that Sandy Hewson appeared unexpectedly in Cornwall. He drove up to the door of Headland Cottage in a rented car and began unloading baggage as Derek came outside.

"Hey, Two Lunch, what a great surprise!"

"Decided to change my life, old sod. Thought I'd expose you to the

metamorphic Alexander Hewson. You can watch me struggle free of the chrysalis, protect me as my new wings spread and dry, and then cheer like hell as I fly away."

The tragedy was that Sandy Hewson could not write as well as he spoke. His new scenario was, he said, based on the development of a breakthrough in English poetry. Instead of wasting his juices trying to pound the Canterbury Tales into concrete skulls, he was now going to relax, stop resisting his impulses, and allow the volcano within him to erupt and fill pages with spectacular images.

Derek put Hewson in the corner room with its view of the ocean. They stood at the window on the first day. "Why the barrier?" Hewson asked. He was looking down at the trestles and striped yellow and black boards arranged across the grass near the point of the promontory. "It looks like a police operation down there."

"A safety precaution," Derek said. "What you can't see from this angle is the drop of a hundred feet to the rocks below. It worries me. I'm getting ready to have a permanent wall erected. But I suppose I'm putting it off because I hate to spoil the lawn."

Hewson made immediate use of the headland. He found a wicker chair on the back porch and he carried it to the grassy oval near the overhang. Here he sat on fine mornings with notebook on knee and pen in hand, writing poetry. It was terrible stuff. By midday, when he finished working and came in to eat lunch and drink a bottle of wine, Derek would be back from his morning stint at the shop near the harbor.

"Take a look at that," Hewson would say, spreading the scrawled pages of his notebook before his host. "Tell me what you think."

Derek thought it was rubbish. It was nothing but paragraphs of tedious description broken into uneven lines of three or four words each. If this was poetry, then Dylan Thomas was scrum half for the Welsh national rugby team.

Derek stared at the pages, letting time elapse before he spoke. "This is interesting stuff, Two Lunch," he said. "You get a bang out of writing this, I can tell."

At first, perhaps, yes. But gradually Alexander Hewson's state of mind deteriorated. Just as he had arrived, a beefy bearded parody of the handsome athlete Derek remembered, so now his former merry personality went through a disturbing change. Derek watched as his sister's husband became increasingly sullen while the weeks went on.

The nadir was reached when a publisher sent back a hefty batch

of Hewson's work with negative comments attached. "What do they know?" the aspiring poet ranted. "I give them pearls and they expect pig feed. They aren't ready for me."

After his wine Hewson turned depressive. "It's no use. I don't know why I bother. I've wasted my life."

"Come on, Two Lunch," Derek said. "Let's go out on the lawn and throw a football."

"Why don't you go out on the lawn and throw yourself into the ocean?" Hewson said.

Derek was able to roll with this sort of punch. He had decided in the time since Sandy's arrival that the old friendship belonged to the university days and should be forgotten. Hewson was now just another house guest and a difficult one at that. Besides, Derek was so happy with the cottage, the sea view, the shop, and with his comfortable evenings in the company of Old Crowther, that he was prepared to abide Hewson until he decided to go away.

"How are things at the cottage?" Crowther asked one night as they sat at their tiny table in The Turk's Head. The curtains were drawn and because of a night chill the electric fire was turned on. Gulls cried above the roof.

"You mean my guest?" Derek acknowledged his companion's perceptive glance. "He's becoming a bit of a pain."

"Guests are like fish," Crowther said. "After three days they start to smell. This one is going on three months."

"Yes. If it were not for the fact that he's my sister's husband, I'd ask him to leave."

"Some husband, staying away all this time."

"I think my sister prefers it," Derek said.

Lottie certainly did prefer it. Her telephone conversations were full of animation these days. She was putting more work in hand, seeing new friends. "Whatever you do, Derek," she concluded, "don't let Sandy come back, please."

This fervent request posed a problem for Derek Jennings. He took his sister at her word; to send Hewson back to her would be a betrayal. But at the same time Sandy was becoming more than just a bore around Headland Cottage. His temper became increasingly foul as the list of publishers not interested in his work grew longer. Still he spent mornings in the wicker chair beyond the barrier, notebook on his lap, eyes turned to the gray horizon. But the few lines he managed to put down gave him no joy.

He blundered into the kitchen one lunchtime, banging the screen

door behind him, throwing his notebook on the table where Derek was sprinkling watercress on cucumber sandwiches. "Read that!" he snapped, his voice thick with outrage.

Derek read the half-dozen fragmented lines, found no meaning in them, and was not quick enough at disguising his reaction. "Interesting stuff," he said. "Are you going to do more with it?"

"Yes. I'm going to crumple it and ram it down your interesting throat."

"Sandy, if you've had a bad morning, don't take it out on me."

"Well, why don't you say what you think when I show you something?"

"I'm not a critic. You expect too much."

Hewson slouched out of the room, playing the defeated man. He reappeared moments later, fired with fresh anger. "I've had it," he yelled. "I'm going to pack it in. I'm going back to Lottie in Montreal."

It was the declaration Derek feared most of all. He recalled Lottie's descriptions of Sandy's disruptive presence, and more recently, her delight at the progress of her life without him. Please don't let him come back—that had been her latest appeal. And now the Hewson threatening to return would be an uglier man than the one who had abandoned her.

That evening at The Turk's Head, Derek drank his first pint far more quickly than usual, then stalled on his second, staring into the collapsing foam. Old Crowther thumbed his pipe and assessed this abnormal behavior. "How's the visitor?" he asked at last.

"Getting set to leave. Or so he says."

"Good riddance."

"Not exactly. He's going back to my sister in Montreal." Derek went on to explain the details of the situation.

"I see," the old shop assistant said. "A quandary. You don't want him here and your sister doesn't want him back home."

"That's it. If Alexander Hewson did not exist, it would not be necessary to invent him."

Much later, when last orders had been called and Derek brought the pints from the bar, Old Crowther said, "The answer, of course, is an accident."

"To what?"

"The answer to the Hewson problem."

"He's free to have an accident any time he wants." The hours of beer and conversation had put the two men on a plane of understanding where they enjoyed an uninhibited sharing of ideas that

would have been unacceptable to both of them when sober.

"You can't wait," the old man said. "It wants to happen now."

Derek put his head close enough to feel on his nose the warmth of Crowther's pipe. "Are you hinting at murder, my friend?"

"Call it an assisted misadventure."

"Impossible. But what kind?"

"He sits every day on the headland in that wicker chair. I've seen him from the road." Crowther reduced his pint to the last inch. "A few feet closer and he'd be over the edge."

"But he'd never go any closer."

"Unless there was mist and he couldn't see." The final draft went down. "We're expecting misty mornings any day now."

As they left the pub, Derek said, "You're a terrible man, Crowther, putting temptation in my way."

"It's the precipice that's the temptation. With a pest like Hewson sitting by the edge of it every day, I don't know how you can resist it."

As he approached the cottage that night, Derek heard Hewson's voice shouting inside. He went in and found his guest using the telephone. "It's my home as much as yours," he was bellowing. "I can come back if I want to. You're my wife. You'll damn well behave like it."

Derek took the telephone from Hewson's hand. "Lottie?"

She was crying. "Oh, Derek, I rang expecting to get you. He sounds worse than ever."

"I know."

"Don't let him come back. Do something, do anything. Give him money to go away but don't let him come back here. I'll do something desperate if I have to live with him again."

"Don't worry, Lottie. You won't have to." The twins were so close that Derek could feel the panic Lottie was experiencing. He put down the phone and it was as if a living connection had been severed—he felt that sort of pain.

Hewson was back in front of the television set where he spent most evenings.

Derek approached him from behind. "Enjoying your uninterrupted viewing?" he asked.

"Yes. Did you enjoy your uninterrupted drinking?" Hewson ignored the fact that there was a whiskey glass beside his chair.

"Sandy," Derek said, "let's not argue. This visit isn't working. Why don't you give your writing a chance in new surroundings?"

Ever tried Italy? I can let you have some money and you could be in Florence by the weekend."

Hewson laughed. "The Jennings twins are doing nothing but offering me cash tonight. No, I'm going back to Montreal. I think what I need is Lottie, and lots of her." He leaned forward and switched channels from the middle of a Shakespeare drama to the middle of a political broadcast. "Give me a few days to get my head together and I'll be on my way."

The following evening at The Turk's Head, Derek waited for Old Crowther. When his friend came in and settled himself, Derek said, "I'm at the crunch. He is definitely going back to plague my sister."

"Heard the weather forecast?" The question was not inappropriate. "Heavy mist tonight, not clearing before midday tomorrow."

Derek could hardly believe he was considering the idea. But he heard himself saying, "How can I persuade him to go out there in a heavy mist?"

"Think of something. Tell him the view as the mist lifts off the water is a sight every poet must see."

"Mmmm." Derek pondered. "But there's twenty feet of ground between the barrier and the lip of the precipice. He'll just climb over, carry his chair forward, set it down, and wait for the mist to clear."

"He's *accustomed* to twenty feet of ground," Crowther said. "If you go out tonight and quietly move the barrier forward, say, ten feet, he'll carry his chair into thin air."

For a while Derek's resolve seemed to harden but by the end of the evening his attitude had turned 180 degrees. "I can't do it. He deserves it, and I want my sister to be free of him. But still . . ."

Old Crowther was looking very wise. "The Lord's Prayer says, 'Lead us not into temptation.' Yet here you are, living at Headland Cottage, as if Fate brought you here for some purpose. Your brother-in-law arrives uninvited, and without guidance from you he begins frequenting the edge of the precipice. And now, just as his behavior is at its most unendurable, the mist falls." Crowther shrugged. "I would say you have been led most flagrantly into temptation."

"I concede all that," Derek said. "But I could never take a man's life."

The mist was heavy when he arrived home. There were no lights burning in the cottage—Hewson had gone to bed deliberately leaving the place dark. Perhaps it was this callous gesture that tipped

the balance of Derek Jennings' resolve. He would shift the barrier and let Fate take its course.

Walking carefully across the shrouded lawn, he came to the first trestle. It was the work of only a few minutes to move it and the others and the yellow and black striped planks a distance of ten feet closer to the edge. Far below, the sea whispered in its sleep.

In the morning there was pale light in the sky but the cottage was wrapped in cotton wool. Hewson made himself eggs and bacon and ate them standing up at the kitchen window. "Can't see a damn thing," he said.

"Not now," Derek said from the table. "But one thing you must not miss while you're still here. That's the moment when the mist rises from the ocean."

"Have you seen it?"

"Yes, and it's unearthly. You really must take your chair out and be waiting for it. You'll never see a sight like it again." Derek paused. "It could start happening at any minute."

Hewson said no more. He left the greasy plate and fork in the sink, as always, went out onto the porch and found his wicker chair. The last Derek saw of Sandy Hewson, he was trudging into the fog with the chair over his shoulder.

Expecting to hear some sort of cry, Derek waited by the window. He heard nothing. Had the plot failed? Had the sound been muffled by the moisture in the air? Quickly Derek struggled into a raincoat and went out onto the lawn, hurrying toward the barrier. When he reached it, he peered into the murk and called, "Sandy?"

There was no reply.

He had to make sure, in case Hewson was sitting there invisible, stubbornly refusing to answer. Derek clambered over the boards, walked cautiously two steps forward into the mist, stepped into space, and felt his heart seize as the cold air rushed upward at him . . .

The bodies were found at the base of the cliff trapped among the protruding rocks where, at high tide, the Atlantic rushes in and scours the crescent beach. Even by midday the mist refused to clear, its persistence making recovery operations difficult. When at last a boat could get in and the bodies were claimed and identified, the police were left with a case of deaths by misadventure. But the villagers were suspicious and always would be. Only Old Crowther

could have shed some light on what happened up at Headland Cottage, but he remained silent as the grave.

What puzzled the old man in the last lonely years of his life was how the barrier could have been so close to the edge of the precipice. When he went there in the small hours to do his reluctant friend a favor, he intended to shift it forward a little less than ten feet. Yet when he came back at lunchtime to return it to its original position, the clearing mist revealed the barrier standing within a yard of the edge.

The discrepancy suggested to Crowther that his judgment of distances, even allowing for darkness and heavy fog, was not what it should be. The old man blamed this on the beer and resolved to reduce his nightly intake by a couple of pints.



DETECTIVER SE

CORPUS DELECTABLE

by MARK GRENIER

Says a hard-working fellow named Lou,
"When my time for relaxing is due,
There is nothing as fine
As a full-bodied wine —
And a full-bodied mystery too."

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a **NEW** short story by

ERNEST SAVAGE

We don't often get a story about a night watchman. Grogarty had been one for eighteen years and had never missed a night's work. Now he was nearing his sixty-fifth birthday and mandatory retirement. And there was that thing that happened—except that everyone acted as if it hadn't happened at all . . . a story to savor slowly . . .

A TIME OF SUMMING UP

by **ERNEST SAVAGE**

It may have been a macho thing with Grogarty—he wasn't sure. He'd allowed that thought to take the witness chair in the courtroom of his mind, but no jury had been impaneled. Or was still out—he wasn't sure of that either.

"The thing is," Swift said to him, "if old man Phelps still ran the place, he'd've pinned a medal on your chest, given you a bonus, and made sure your picture got in the papers."

"It ain't that," Grogarty said. "The kid's alive—that's the important thing. But you'd think *somebody* would say *something* to me."

"The thing is," Swift said, "there's nobody there to say you aye or nay. It's a corporation now, Grogarty, cold, impersonal, distant." He shook his bald, gray-fringed head. "I don't know—"

It was a Thursday night at 7:30. One week ago on this night Grogarty had done a brave and dangerous thing. He'd dived into the cold treacherous current of the river that flowed past the warehouse where he was night watchman and saved a drowning boy's life. He'd pulled the kid up on the rotting old wharf that ran the full length of the Phelps Warehouse building and pumped the water out of the boy's breathless lungs until the kid coughed himself alive.

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Then Grogarty had carried the boy to his watchman's shack in the yard of the building, called an ambulance, and held the boy's skinny black body against his own ample chest for warmth until the ambulance arrived. The ambulance came and took the boy away, and that's the last he'd heard of it.

Grogarty sneezed and blew his puffy, reddened nose. He'd caught a cold that night and still had it. But he'd stayed at his post after the ambulance left and had worked every night since. In fact, Grogarty had never missed a night's work in all his 18 years on the job—maybe the only thing he could find to be proud of as he approached his sixty-fifth birthday and mandatory retirement. But he sensed a need for more; that kid—

He shoved his half-eaten plate of dinner away and Mary the waitress took it up and put coffee down.

They were at McGuire's Restaurant, he and Swift, just finishing dinner. Grogarty and Swift had eaten dinner at McGuire's every evening for ten years, ever since Swift's wife died. Swift worked in the warehouse office and lived in a little bungalow he owned four blocks away, and Grogarty, a bachelor, lived in a roominghouse less distant than that. It was handy for them and the food was good, with the best Irish stew in town on Wednesdays.

Swift lit a cigarette, knowing he shouldn't. "Maybe," he said, "it was on accounta the kid was black."

Grogarty's eyes flamed. "What was I supposed to do—throw him back?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. But it ain't that—it's something else."

"I know, I know," Swift said.

Grogarty got up and went over to the register and paid Mary for his meal, adding a seventy-five cent tip, plus two dollars for the quart Thermos of coffee and sandwich he'd pick up at 10:45 on his way to work. It was a routine years old now and neither of them commented. Mary was about 35, had a ten-year-old son, and had worked at McGuire's for seven years. She'd never been married. She had a nice black-Irish smile and told Grogarty, as he left, to take care of his cold.

Now Grogarty had over three hours to kill before work, and through the years he'd found a number of ways to do it mercifully. Sometimes he went across the river and watched a ball game—if the team was on a hot streak—and sometimes he and Swift went

to a movie. But lately Grogarty had been going back to his room and watching TV or reading history, of which he was a minor-league buff. And brooding a lot lately, especially the past week. He was approaching his final years, a time of summing up, and the arithmetic of his life was in the low numbers. He hadn't done much that was bad, but on the other hand he hadn't done much that was good—except for saving the kid, and that was almost as though it hadn't happened.

That night—as usual—he relieved the swing-shift watchman, a guy who seemed to be different every couple of weeks. He took the man's report sheet, which was blank, put his Thermos, sandwich, and book on the desk by the phone, and made his first round.

Phelps Warehouse was 105 years old, a dinosaur of a building, but still strong as a fort. Its exterior walls were made of red brick, its inner floors and framing of massive wood timbers. Grogarty had ten stations to clock into throughout the building, once each hour. There were two huge rope-activated freight elevators in the building, one of which he rode up on his tours, and the other down. He always returned to his shack in the big loading yard by way of the wharf—and it was on his twelve o'clock tour a week ago that he'd seen the kid in the river.

When the warehouse had been built, most of the freight came and went by the river, but the wharf hadn't been used for that purpose for years and was slowly rotting away—in fact, it was dangerous to walk across. But Grogarty liked the river, which, like history and time, flowed inexorably on, unheeding of kids in its clutch, buildings along its banks, or old men watching.

Grogarty shook his head. The kid worried him. Grogarty had phoned to a dozen places during the past week seeking information about the kid, but had drawn a blank each time, even from the ambulance outfit that had picked the kid up. It nagged him; it was as though it hadn't happened. But it *had*, right here where he stood. He figured the kid had probably swiped a rowboat upriver somewhere and then foundered in it. But it looked like he'd never know—

Grogarty finished his tour and walked back across the big empty loading yard through a slight drizzle, sneezing. One semi was backed into the bank of loading bays that flanked the building. In the old days a dozen might be there and often a night crew working. The place was beginning to haunt him, the emptiness, the inaction. It was declining as he declined, and old men need action to stay alive.

He sneezed again, remembering sharply, as he often did, the smell of coffee on the air from the great bagged mountains of it on the fourth floor of the building. Even now, walking past that empty space where it had once been stored, he'd stop and sniff the still redolent air—the romance of commerce, of distant places refreshing him for a moment.

He poured himself a half cup of coffee and opened the book he'd brought along. It dealt with that period of European history that led up to World War I. It would absorb him for the 40 minutes before he began his second round. The girlie magazines on the shelf below were for the day-side guys, the younger men. Grogarty sneezed—at a lot of things.

"Would you believe," Swift said, "the joint was jumpin' today."

"Meanin' what?" Grogarty said.

"Meanin' we got in fifty automobiles and three semis of machinery today. And what's more—" Swift's lined old face was animated; the pause was for dramatic effect.

"What?" Grogarty said, around a mouthful of Irish stew. It was Wednesday night at McGuire's and Grogarty's cold was better.

"Tomorrow we get in fifty more cars and fourteen semis of machinery."

"What kind of cars?" Grogarty said, retaining an admirable cool. Nothing like this had happened in months, but his habit of pessimism was ingrained.

Swift, on the other hand, for 25 years Chief Clerk of the Phelps administrative staff—and occasionally self-appointed Office Manager—had watched it while it happened.

"Cars!" he said. "What difference what kind of cars?"

"Any coffee?" Grogarty asked, and Swift laughed.

"You and your coffee," he said. "No—no coffee—not yet anyway. But Grogarty, me boyo, the place has come alive again, you've got something to guard through the long reaches of the night and not to just go about pulling black boys from the river." Swift's excitement was feeding on itself, and his brogue, which one acquired with McGuire's air, was thickening as he spoke.

"What happened?" Grogarty wondered. "Did the place change hands again, or what?" Since the Phelps family had sold, there'd been two different owners, each as remote as the other. The paychecks came by mail, currently from Chicago. What few paychecks there are any more, Grogarty amended silently, with the office staff

now down to three or four and only a man named Nick in the warehouse.

"Ye've got no faith," Swift said.

"Who unloaded the stuff?" Grogarty asked, a practical man.

"They got in this special crew—the place was swarmin' with 'em. Like old times, Grogarty, like old times."

"Cut out that phony brogue," Grogarty said. "Even your grandfather was born in Cincinnati, not Dublin." Grogarty had lost some sympathy with the Irish of late—the green of the ould sod being so freely bespattered with its blood. *His* blood, he brooded occasionally, fearing the untapped violence that flowed through his own veins. An unreasonable race, he thought; its sky, though, full of stars. Grogarty took a warm roll and plunged it into the gravy of his stew.

Swift wasn't fazed. He knew Grogarty's feeling about the Irish, but in McGuire's of a Wednesday night it was hard to resist the lilt in the air, even Mary saying, "And would ye like something else?" as she paused at their table, her eyes bright.

Swift answered broadly, "Thank ye no, Mary me lass," and then said to Grogarty, "The thing is, it's better than sittin' on your behind all day, staring out the window." He too was near retirement and feared only boredom in his last days on the job.

"I'll give you that," Grogarty said, wiping his lips.

On his way to work that night he surmised that the cars Swift had bragged about were gas guzzlers the dealers couldn't sell during the present gas crisis, but he was wrong. They were clunkers, not one of them less than five years old, and not a whole fender in the lot. There were 20 or 25 of them parked in the yard behind the high wire-mesh fence, and that many more in the warehouse itself. Five semis were backed importantly into the loading bays, but there was no one about, no work being done.

Grogarty's feelings were a mix of puzzlement and pleasure as he made his first tour. It was good to see *anything* in the silent empty halls of the place, but why beat-up old cars? Well, his not to reason why, he thought as he passed a long line of them parked snugly against a wall, his but to serve and die. "But not tonight, eh, Grogarty?" he said aloud—a growing habit that, talking to himself.

There was a light streaming through the glass door leading to the office area, and Grogarty stopped short, staring at it. The office itself was the seventh checkpoint on his tour and there was always a light showing through that door at night, but not so bright—unless some-

one was working late. Grogarty turned the knob and opened the door cautiously, peering in.

To his right he saw two men bent over a desk covered with papers—bills of lading, it looked like. Cigar smoke hovered in the still air. Grogarty squared his shoulders and went in, right hand on the butt of his holstered gun. The men looked up, then straightened and faced him. One of them pointed a finger.

"You're the night man," he said.

"Grogarty," Grogarty said. His hand hadn't moved. "Who're you?"

"Relax," the man said. "We're from the company."

"How'd you get in?" Grogarty said. He'd never seen them before and didn't like their looks—twenty-dollar haircuts, two-hundred-dollar shoes.

"The front door, Grogarty. We got a key for Pete's sake."

"Show me," Grogarty said, and the man fished out a ring of keys and tossed it on the desk. He grinned sardonically.

"Take your pick," he said.

The other man got a card from his wallet and extended it to Grogarty, who took it with his left hand. The man's name was Frank Martin and the company he represented was the company that sent Grogarty's paychecks. Grogarty handed the card back.

"That's a sharp-looking uniform you've got on," the first man said. "Ever use that gun around here?"

"I've had it out a few times."

"Ever shoot it?"

"I haven't had to."

"Good!" Martin said. Martin was evidently the senior of the two. "Let's see," he said amiably, "you've been on the job for—what? Twenty years?"

"Eighteen," Grogarty said.

"Imagine!" the other man said.

"Fine," Martin said. "We want experience in our guards. Nice meeting you, Mr. Grogarty."

It was a dismissal, but Grogarty didn't take it that way. "What about the boy?" he said. "Is he okay?"

"What boy?"

"The one I fished out of the river two weeks ago tomorrow. The one I called the ambulance about. You guys are management, you should have heard about it. I had it in my report."

The men glanced at each other and Martin shrugged. "It's news to us—but he's probably all right or somebody would have heard."

"What is it you want," the other man said, "a medal? We'll strike you a medal."

Grogarty reddened. "What I want to know is, how is the kid? Nobody I called knew anything about it. It was like a coverup, or something. But why?"

"I'll look into it," Martin said. "I'll let you know."

It was another dismissal and Grogarty took it as such this time, but outside he was still hot under the collar, for a lot of reasons. In the old days the office people often worked late, but the man he relieved was supposed to tell him that, and tonight he hadn't. Besides, Grogarty didn't like the two men—an old man's petulant distrust of the young, he recognized. "They'd've never worked for Phelps," he said aloud. "Besides, what about the kid?"

But they were gone on his next tour, with the front door properly locked; and the rest of that night was like all the others, with, in this case, 40 minutes out of each hour and World War I slowly, inexorably approaching, as Grogarty read and drank coffee.

Thursday evening at McGuire's it was quieter, with less of a crowd and less Irish in the air. But Swift was still full of himself and the new activity at Phelps. "One hundred and twenty-six cars—count 'em!—now under the roof."

"Clunkers," Grogarty said. He was having a steak with mushroom sauce and McGuire's dependably warm rolls. "Do you know a guy with the company—the *new* company—named Frank Martin?"

"From Chicago—yeah. He comes down once in a while to check things out. Why?"

"What things?"

"Whatever needs it—like he was here today checking the car shipments. Why?"

"He was in the office last night—I just wondered." Grogarty didn't press it. He knew that Swift's function had always been unimportant—his main virtue being that he knew where everything in the building was kept—and he'd often wondered how come Swift had been retained after Phelps sold. But he'd wondered that about himself too. More querulous old man stuff, he thought, and went on with his meal. He and Swift were going to a movie that night, one of the X-rated affairs that Swift dragged him off to every once in a while. But not kicking and screaming all the way.

At 10:45 in McGuire's to pick up his sandwich and coffee, Grogarty

stared at Mary with surprise and concern. She had a black eye that was as fresh as new-cut meat and twice as mean-looking. "Who hit you?" he said.

"A door."

"Come on, Mary, no door did that."

She shoved his Thermos of coffee and sandwich across the counter and turned her back. "We're closing early," she said. "In fact, right now." The place was empty.

"Who did it, Mary? I'll break—"

"Good night, Grogarty." She sniffled, walked away, and disappeared into the kitchen. Grogarty glanced at the clock on the wall—10:48 now, a ten-minute walk to the warehouse. He left, angered at somebody. He hated a guy who'd hit a woman.

Grogarty woke up at 2:15, lifting his head off the open book he'd been reading. He looked at his watch, squinted, rubbed his blurred eyes, and looked again. Two sixteen. "Good lord!" he said aloud. He pushed to his feet and nearly fell over, dizzy and nauseated. He gripped the back of his chair and steadied himself enough to pour coffee in his empty cup.

He sipped and then put the cup down and lurched outside, across 20 feet of tarmac to where he knew a water faucet was. He turned it on, put his head under the flow, rubbed himself hard. Then he took a mouthful of water, sloshed it around and spit it out. There was a funny taste in his mouth—metallic.

He stood up, still dizzy, and pressed the water out of his hair. "I been doped," he said. But he could walk a nearly straight line now and went inside the warehouse to the nearest men's room where he dried his head with paper towels and put his cap back on. Then he sat down and thought a minute. He'd had his usual half cup of coffee at 11:45 and then a full cup an hour later. He'd been reading, and then—nothing.

He got up, suddenly full of caution, and turned off the light. Outside the lavatory in the big receiving area, his view was blocked by the newly delivered crates of machinery, but a light was glowing dimly where a light shouldn't be. Grogarty took out his gun, a Walther .38, and advanced toward the light with care. It was coming from in front of the elevator he usually took up in his tour.

The elevator had been raised six feet or so and a man was kneeling in front of the open shaft working on something. A lighted hand-lantern, battery-powered, was on the floor next to him, as well as

an unzipped flight bag. He was busy with something in his hands and Grogarty pointed the Walther at his head from ten feet away and said firmly, "Put your hands on the back of your neck and stand up."

But the man didn't do that. He turned his head almost casually, looked at Grogarty over his shoulder, and said, as though he knew him, "Grogarty?"

"You bet," Grogarty said. "Grogarty in the flesh. Do what I told you."

"But you're supposed to be—"

"Yeah, I know, asleep."

"You *was* asleep. I seen you twenty minutes ago. I checked."

"I was playing possum. Do what I told you."

"Oh, damn!" the man said now, as if big trouble were brewing. He got up slowly, his head hanging. He was small and slender, half of Grogarty's size. He had on a dark jacket over a light-blue turtle-neck sweater, a dark leather cap, dark pants, and dark runner's shoes. He looked to be about 45. He repeated his curse softly as Grogarty reached to a wall switch and turned on some lights. The man's eyes flinched. "Gimme a break," he said, a whine.

"Put your hands on the back of your neck and turn around," Grogarty said. The man did, sighing, and Grogarty patted him down, feeling nothing under the clothes but sinew and bones. Grogarty the hero, he was thinking, twice in two weeks a hero. Phelps would have thrown a company picnic for him, but Phelps was gone. Now it was Martin and whoever from Chicago. A pattern was forming in Grogarty's clearing mind.

"Did Martin send you?" he said.

"I don't know no Martin."

"Are you the one that belted Mary?"

"Mary? Mary who? I didn't belt nobody named Mary." Now he whined again, "Look, Grogarty, gimme a break, huh? I'll make it worth your while. I been down four times already—one more time and they nail the door shut."

"Who told you my name?"

"I don't know—this guy on the phone. He said you'd be asleep—*promised*. He was just a voice."

"Martin?"

"I tole you, I don't know no Martin."

Grogarty considered: somebody had made Mary give him doped coffee, somebody who knew his daily routine. Mary had told the

man to go whistle and got herself a black eye, plus, probably, a threat to her son. *That* would do it, the threat to her son. No wonder she'd turned her back on him tonight.

Then this little rat of a man would torch the place and a lot of insurance money would get paid. It was all wonderfully simple now in Grogarty's mind. They'd kept him on as night watchman because it would have looked bad to replace him with one of their own; but old Grogarty had fallen asleep, they'd say; maybe he fell asleep every night after 18 years of it, but you just don't fire a loyal old fella like that. "Damn!" Grogarty whispered aloud.

"You bet," the man said.

"Take your pants off," Grogarty said.

"What?"

"You heard what I said—take your shoes and pants off." Grogarty had envisioned this moment more than once and had long since decided how he'd handle it. A man without his pants becomes a shamed boy.

Grogarty placed the muzzle of the Walther in the man's left ear and the man began quickly to undress, his soon-revealed legs slat-thin. He shivered in the bland night air. "Gimme a break," he pleaded again. There were tears in his eyes.

"I'm gonna let you go," Grogarty said impulsively. Why not? What did he owe anybody any more?

"Huh?" The man's eyes widened with the news, then narrowed again. "But not like this, huh? Not without my pants. I got to have my pants!" He was alive now with hope. "Look, take the money—there must be two hundred in the wallet and a hundred in each of the shoes, under the innersoles. Four hundred, Grogarty, for just a pair of my own pants!"

"How'd you get in the place?"

"The front door. But—"

"Martin gave you the key." It *had* to be Martin. Rage was growing in Grogarty's head, the Irish factor. But he cooled it quickly.

"I don't know no Martin," the man repeated. "The door was unlocked, like they tole me it would be. Look, lemme have my pants—*they'll kill me, Grogarty!*"

"Who will?"

"Ah, come on—you're no greenhorn—*they* will. You know who *they* is."

Sure, Grogarty knew who *they* is, or was, or were. Martin was just one of them. They were wherever dirty work, skulduggery, and

corruption took place. They were everywhere, under judicial robes, behind mayors' desks, on city councils; even, Grogarty thought in a flash, in hospitals. *They* somehow had squelched the story of the black boy's near drowning—*they* wanted no undue attention drawn to the night watchman at Phelps Warehouse two weeks before it was scheduled to burn. Grogarty almost admired the power of the thing—of *they*.

"They'll kill me!" the little man whined again, and Grogarty believed him.

"What've your pants got to do with it?"

"I got something in my wallet—a key."

"To what?"

"A safe-deposit box. It's my protection. As long as I got that key I stay alive. Also I got a list—of dates, amounts, places, names."

"Anybody I know?" Grogarty had paused, a thought forming.

"If you read the papers—Grogarty, lemme have it!"

"Get out of here," Grogarty said. The thought was solid in his mind now—but it was an outside chance at best.

"Not like this!"

"Like that." Grogarty knelt and patted the man's pants, felt the lump of the wallet and a lump that was car keys. He took the keys out and tossed them to the man, who caught them reflexively. "Now go, beat it!" he said.

"Grogarty!"

"Go! And take your flight bag with you."

Grogarty followed the man out through the office and locked the door behind him, watched him scurry across the street and out of sight in the dark. So far he felt sorry only for Mary.

Grogarty hung around in the unaccustomed light of morning until Martin showed up. Grogarty figured he would, playing short odds. His day relief hadn't appeared, which didn't surprise him. His day relief was no doubt one of *them*, lower echelon, and why would he come to work at a place he knew wouldn't be there in the morning?

It was 7:45 when Martin finally arrived, looking oddly bereft, as though he *hadn't* lost something. It pleased Grogarty, who'd drunk another cup of coffee to achieve the proper effect around the eyes; and it worked fine, he was almost out on his feet when Martin opened the door of the shack and came in.

"You got word," Grogarty said thickly, "on the black boy."

"What?" Martin frowned. "No—I haven't had time to check."

"I wanna know about him," Grogarty said, groggily pleased with his line of attack. He *did* want to know about the boy. The boy had been betrayed somehow, and Grogarty with him. But they were getting back some of their own now—and might get a lot more later.

"What happened last night?" Martin asked clumsily. "Routine?"

"Routine," Grogarty mumbled. "Well, not quite routine, Mr. Martin. I don't routinely fall asleep on the job, but last night by George I did. First time ever—and I'm not proud of it, but honest confession's good for the soul, right?" He grinned foolishly.

"You were asleep?"

"Most of the night, Mr. Martin. Just woke up a while ago. Can't understand it, either—drank my coffee as usual, but—"

Martin had turned and walked out and Grogarty watched his thoughtfully bowed back cross the tarmac to the loading ramp up which the 126 cars had been driven.

Then Grogarty ambled the three blocks to his roominghouse, weaving like an amiable Irish drunk, tipping his cap to the few ladies he met on the way. He was carrying the arsonist's pants and shoes in a large brown sack, like a glutton's lunch.

But Grogarty didn't go to bed as usual; he took a shower, the last ten minutes of it cold. He was thinking hard, the idea he'd had last night grown to a plan, though dangling by a thread. But *they* were thinking too, he knew; they took setbacks, but not defeats. Time, money, and power were on their side, and they were good at their work, they were pros.

After he'd turned the arsonist loose he'd made a thorough inspection of the warehouse, marveling as he went. In the six feet or so of space under each of the huge elevators he had found a layer of oily waste material, put there no doubt by the day man, who was surely one of them. The arsonist had been about to rig some sort of timed firing system that would have set off both batches of material at once when Grogarty stopped him. And the flames would have shot up the shafts as though they were chimney stacks and set fire to the whole building in a snap, very much aided by the fuel tanks in the 126 cars strategically placed on all four floors.

Under the shower, Grogarty was awed at the sight it would have been, the whole place consumed before the first fireman got his tin hat on. And each of the old cars valued at—say—three grand for insurance purposes, plus all the other stuff they'd gathered together, plus the building itself. No wonder the arsonist figured to be killed.

You don't cost *them* that kind of money and live.

Out of the shower and feeling halfway fresh, Grogarty hung on to his slender hope: it was the last day of the month, a day important in the business world, a day on which things sometimes end, like contracts—and insurance policies.

He put on a robe, went downstairs, and slipped a dime into the roominghouse phone in the entry hall. He dialed the Phelps Warehouse number and in a minute was talking with Swift. He asked him one question and in five more minutes got an answer that elated him: the fire insurance on the building and its varying contents expired at midnight tonight, Friday. It couldn't have suited him better.

When Swift asked him what in hell he wanted to know that for, Grogarty told him to button his lip, that he'd tell him later—like Sunday morning in church.

"How about tonight at McGuire's?" Swift said.

"I won't be there."

Upstairs in his room Grogarty considered the probabilities. They'd either fire the place tonight before twelve, or re-insure the premises on Monday, then wait a while and get on with the job. They do not, he reminded himself, accept defeat. Probably they'll wait, he thought judiciously, because cutting the insurance coverage to a matter of hours might be a bit too fine, even considering *their* powers of persuasion. Thinking this, he lay down on his bed and went to sleep, awakening at three o'clock in the afternoon as usual, and feeling fine, very macho for a man his age, the plan fully formed now.

The arsonist's name was Joe Felton. According to his driver's license he was 47. He lived across the river in a neighborhood not quite as rundown as Grogarty's.

His wallet was dynamite. Aside from the money—nowhere near \$200, Grogarty noted—and the key for a safe-deposit box carefully sealed in an inside pocket, there was the list of names, dates, places, and amounts. Grogarty unfolded and scanned it in growing surprise—some of the finest local names that money could buy. The D.A., Grogarty thought, would love to get his mitts on this; but then Grogarty—a quick study—scanned it again for the D.A.'s name itself; and found it. Arson was big business these days, and it took big men to run it properly.

As he saw it, his task was simple; merely to keep the place from

burning down before midnight. He went downstairs to the phone again, looked up Felton's number, and dialed it, letting it ring 14 times before hanging up and beginning to worry.

In mufti, wearing a fedora he hadn't had on in 15 years, Grogarty lurked across the street from the Phelps office entrance. It was after five and he watched Swift emerge, lock the door, and head toward his house. A little earlier the two office girls had left, one of whom, the brunette, Swift had told him, couldn't type, couldn't take dictation, and could barely answer the phone. But was built like a sailor's dream.

Grogarty understood that now, as he'd come to understand a lot of things, like why there was no guard in the shack, even now, and probably wouldn't be until he himself got there. And probably wouldn't be tomorrow and Sunday. He and Swift were the only real people left in the place, everyone else was window dressing, privates and corporals and camp followers in the ranks of *them*. They'd been setting the stage for months.

Grogarty went home, made himself a quick supper and a Thermos of instant coffee, got on his uniform and went back to the warehouse. It was 6:30—four and a half hours before he was due on the job, five and a half before the insurance expired. If somebody, like Martin, should come by and ask what he was doing here so early, he'd tell him he was so ashamed of falling asleep last night, he was redeeming the lost hours.

But nobody came by. At midnight Grogarty was standing on the wharf looking across the river at Waterfront Park, watching lights go out one bank at a time, leaving only a scattered few to trace the paths. In the old days they remained on until dawn, but what with the energy crisis— And in the old days the Phelps employees held their annual picnic there, over by the soft-ball diamond. But those times were gone forever.

Grogarty sighed, a thing he seldom did; but he sensed an end to things and no new beginning yet in sight. He went back to the guard shack and treated the rest of that night like any other.

Felton wasn't home; or, if he was home, he wasn't answering his door. Felton lived in the right half of a small brick duplex not far from Waterfront Park. Grogarty knocked on the door again, using the flat of his hand, and then peered through the dirty front window before circling around behind. There was a single-car garage there,

but it was empty, the doors open. "Damn!" Grogarty said.

Greatly disappointed, he walked back up the street toward the crosstown bus stop three blocks away. He was halfway there when he heard his name called and turned to see Felton at the wheel of a middle-aged Impala creeping along the street behind him. Felton pulled to a stop and Grogarty crossed the street and got in the car.

Felton greeted him, a sickly smile on his face. "You look different, Grogarty," he said, "sharp. I hardly recognized you without no uniform on."

"I am different. Is this heap hot?"

"Don't ask. You got my stuff, Grogarty? That's why you came by—right? Keep the money."

"Do I look like I got your stuff?"

"Man, you gotta gimme back my wallet! They're gonna kill me without I got it!"

"Have they tried yet?"

"They been by twice already—two big bruisers. I been watchin' from down the street. That's why I hadda swipe this heap—they know mine. That's how I seen you—watchin' for them. I been scared even to go in and get some clothes."

The car was moving again and Felton turned a corner with a backward glance to see if he was tailed, a haunted man. He looked terrible. He needed a shave and his borrowed or stolen pants puddled around his narrow hips like a collapsed tent. It was possible now to feel sorry for him, but Grogarty resisted.

"Let's get some lunch," Grogarty said. "I'm hungry."

"I ain't, I can't eat."

"I can. Over there." Grogarty pointed to a restaurant ahead. It was noon Saturday and he was suddenly famished.

"On you," Felton said. "I ain't got a dime."

The view of Phelps Warehouse from Waterfront Park at night was new to Grogarty and he was enjoying it. He poured himself a second cup of coffee from the Thermos he'd had filled at McGuire's before taking the bus across the river. Not Mary's coffee tonight because Mary didn't work Saturdays, but it was good nonetheless. Grogarty felt almost at peace on a peaceful night watching a peaceful scene. For the last possible time. The warehouse was back-lit by the glow of lights from the city's sprawling south side, a hulking featureless silhouette. But Grogarty knew every inch of the place and knew just where to watch.

At 12:30 it began, a smudge of dark against the aurora of lights, smoke curling upward in the still night air. And soon a glow of pink, and then a tongue of flame from the roof, its reflection broken by the ripples of the river's flow.

Grogarty was entranced. He sat stone-still on the bench as flames seemed to burst from all parts of the building at once, muffled booms resounding like distant cannon fire as the cars' tanks blew.

"Wow!" he said, transfixed; but saddened for a moment too, so much of his life going up in flames. But then he felt joy, triumph—he'd beat them! The place wasn't insured. He heard sirens, far-away wails in the night, but the fire johnnies, as he'd known, would get there just in time to damp down the ashes. Felton was good at his work.

The roof went with a roar that echoed across the reddened waters, a monstrous cloud of sparks boiling toward the sky, and then the walls seemed to go all at once, and Grogarty finished his cup of coffee and leaned back on the bench, relaxed.

It was over, the past gone, tomorrow unnamed, unspoken for.

The little man in the baggy corduroy pants came out of the dark, sat next to him on the bench, and said, "Okay, Grogarty, you got it?"

"I got it."

"Gimme it."

Grogarty handed him a bulky shoebox and Felton opened it and dumped the contents on the ground at his feet. He picked up the wallet and peered into it in the dark. From across the river the rosy mound of coals that was Phelps Warehouse cast little light. "Is it all here, Grogarty?"

"It's all there. The keys, the list, the money—eighty-three bucks, not two hundred."

Felton put the wallet in his pocket, the rest of the stuff back in the box, got up and began to leave, but stopped as though to say something. But he only shook his head and walked away.

Grogarty found the black boy after seven days of patient search. He was a twelve-year-old bundle of bones who lived in a ghetto shack on the south side of town. At first the kid denied who he was.

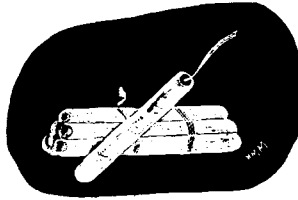
But Grogarty would have none of that, and the kid finally said, well, okay, so I was out fishing and the boat tipped over. So what? No mention of whose boat, no thanks for being saved.

Fishing in the middle of the night? Grogarty asked; and the kid said, well, you fish when you can, fish are good to eat, a judgment confirmed in part by the smell of some of them frying in the back part of the kid's house.

So you lost your pole then, I guess, Grogarty said; and the kid admitted he had.

So Grogarty went out—with nothing better to do these days—and bought the kid a new pole and a bunch of stuff to go with it, and the kid's defensive dark eyes actually lit up.

Which was enough for Grogarty. He felt that both he and the kid had won a little something for their trouble—and the risks they'd run.



DETECTIVERSE

GRAND OPENING

by RILEY HUGHES

The bride never cried for the groom.
The coroner said, "Exhume!"
"There's something odd in that tomb—"
"More arsenic than lace, I presume."

© 1980 by Riley Hughes.

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 551st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the poignant story of a sixteen-year-old mountain girl . . .

The author, Sylvia Tacker, is nearing legal retirement age, and she has been writing mystery stories ever since she was five years old—to scare herself to sleep. Much later she studied writing and journalism at the University of Oklahoma and "put in some time" working on a weekly newspaper, "writing classifieds, typing stencils, doing ad layouts, writing the 'women's' news, and even writing the sports page when the entire sports staff had the flu."

She still puts herself to sleep with scary stories. "I Can't Go Home" is one of them . . .

I CAN'T GO HOME

by SYLVIA TACKER

They say you can't go home again.
And for me—I guess it's true.

Yet, in the fall of the year, there is something that begins to pull and tug at my insides so hard that I have to hold myself back to keep from catching the next Greyhound bus out of here.

I don't know if this feeling happens to everybody that's away from home or just to mountain people like me. It's so strong—that aching feeling inside—that I hurt all over, especially my head, where the scar is.

Most of the time, these ten years, I just got along fine, didn't even notice the homesickness—that's what it is—a real sickness for home.

It's only when the goldy brown leaves begin to flutter back and forth and drop from the twigs and pile up under the trees that I feel that rope tie itself around my middle and start to pull at me. It's

© 1980 by Sylvia Tacker.

when the wind at night has a crisp nip to it that I think of the mountain nights just before the first snow. And I want to go home again to see my mama and the two little young ones and poor old Uncle Einer.

But I can't. I'm supposed to be dead.

For the sake of all of them—mama and the little ones and Uncle Einer—I've got to be dead.

Sometimes my head aches so bad inside that the whole terrible night comes back to me just as though it was happening all over again.

Papa came home that evening after fighting the grass fire that took all our crop. His temper was flaring out like it always did when he couldn't get things to go his way.

He came rampaging up to the door with his face all smoke-stained and his hair singed by the fire. He was swinging his ax that he'd been using to cut the fire lane that hadn't done one bit of good. The fire had just skipped over it and had gone on to the next field.

We were all tired and singed and I'll admit that I had slipped off ahead of everybody and gone home to wash my hair and put it up in curlers—those big round metal ones the size of tomato soup cans. And I was trying to keep out of sight beyond the door. I could see he was blazing mad.

And then I saw that pesky little brown chicken of mine pecking away at the ground right in front of his feet. He probably would have just given it a kick except that my cat came along just then, yowling for her dinner the way she does, and he could hear the two young ones whining and crying in the kitchen. His frustrated fury at the fire just exploded and he swung the ax at the poor little chicken and swiped its head right off—and then he started for the cat.

He was bellowing and I began crying and screaming and kicking at him to save the cat and he raised the ax again and aimed it right at me. He hit me in the head and I fell to the floor, with the blood pouring into my eyes—those big tin curlers had kept the blade from going right through my head like it did to the poor chicken.

And then my mother came running at him, thin and smoke-tired though she was, pulling his arm and begging him to stop. And he, crazy mad, was yelling.

"I'll shut all their mouths. Won't do no good for them to yowl and whine and be hungry—there ain't no food for anyone—it's burnt to a crisp. All gone, it's all gone."

He shoved at my mother and headed for the kitchen looking for the two little ones. I lay still as ever I could and when he stepped over me I snaked out a hand and pulled at his leg. In that instant when he stumbled, mama grabbed at the ax and then instead of taking it away from him, she swung it at his head. Oh, God!

When next I knew what was going on, I was lying on the couch and poor old Uncle Einer was swabbing at the cut on my head and patting me on the shoulder.

"The little ones and mama? Are they all right?" I whispered up at him.

"Yes, Mary Deseree, they're all right. The little ones are asleep up in their room and your ma is resting herself over there in the corner."

Uncle Einer was awkward with his one good arm. His other one was like a withered stick that hung useless at his side. Ever since a horse kicked him when he was a little kid he'd been stove up, as he called it, and mama felt so responsible for him, he'd lived with us for always. He worked around the place, mostly helping mama, and except for me, that's the only help she ever got.

"And papa?"

"Your pa is dead," Uncle Einer said, "he's dead. And your ma and me, we've been talking it over. We been thinking we'd better say it was an intruder that got you and your papa. If we tell it was your ma that killed him—well, then it would only be me to take care of the two young 'uns and help you with your schooling and I can't do it, I just can't do it. With your ma in jail and all—hanged even, more'n likely. So if you could bring yourself to do it, Mary Deseree, won't you please help us with the intruder part? You know, describe him so they'll believe you, and your ma and I will swear it's the truth."

My head ached something awful and I could hardly think. Except that I can't lie very well. I stutter and make faces and usually cry when I try to tell a lie. And something like this!

"Oh, no, Uncle Einer, I just couldn't. You know how I can't tell a lie. Why don't you take me away someplace—someplace far away where I won't be a hurt to you and ma and the little ones—another town somewhere and I'll stay away until you get it all worked out. But I can't lie for you."

And then Uncle Einer gave me a great big swig of whiskey and the next thing I could feel was the jouncing and bumping of his old truck going along the rutted track leading away from our farm.

It was pitch-black and he had me bundled up in blankets on a mattress in the back of the pickup—and I could imagine him—how he drove, one-handed. He'd press his body against the steering wheel when he shifted gears and reach across through the wheel when he had to turn on the windshield wipers or the lights.

I lifted my hand to my head. Mama must have taken the curlers out of my hair because it was soft and sort of sticky there on my forehead. Salve, maybe, that dear Uncle Einer had soothed my wound with—or maybe more blood.

I must have been half conscious all through that ride, and the next few days they all ran together. He must have taken me straight to a hospital. Strange faces looked down at me and kindly hands and voices floated all around me. My head was still hurting—but the blood and sticky feeling was gone.

Uncle Einer must have worked something out for me because after the hospital I went home with these Purdys and they have been so good and kind. They kept calling me a little orphan, even though I was near 16 and still had my mama, I hoped.

I kept quiet about mama and the fire and everything. I knew I couldn't go home. Not just yet. Not until mama and the young little ones were safe and cared for. In our town the people work hard and pray to God on Sunday. There's only one side to everything—it's either right or it's wrong. Murder is wrong and lying is wrong. I was just sure as anything that if they found out that mama had killed my pa, the man of the family, why, she would never be forgiven—but if she was a poor widow woman with two little ones and a crippled brother to look after, they would be the souls of kindness. So I had to stay away, even though I had that awful pull in me to go home.

Finally I just had to find out if things were settled down and maybe I could go just for a little visit.

So one quiet night, with the Purdys gone off to church, I called mama.

Just to be on the safe side, in case mama might still be troubled and someone might be listening, I pretended to be our old Aunt Desi.

"This is Aunt Desi," I said in a high croaking voice. "How are you doing?"

"Fine, just fine," mama said.

"And the little ones? How are they?"

"Fine, just fine. Everyone is just fine. Folks are real good to us.

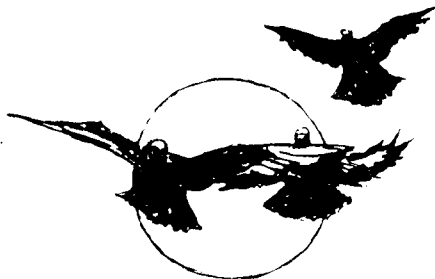
We've got firewood enough for winter and supplies and the likes of that."

"And Mary Deseree, how is she?" I asked, stammering a little, still mimicking our old aunt.

Mama's voice was flat.

"Oh," she said, "Mary Deseree is dead. She died after that terrible night. Yes, Desi, Mary Deseree is dead."

So that's why, even when the tug of autumn is strongest inside me and the wind whispers, "Go home, go home," on the crisp crackling nights, I can't go home, ever.



DETECTIVERSE

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

by JAMES BIGWOOD

I've never done anything like this before
And I must say it's got me quite worried.
Should I use a blunt instrument, break down the door,
And make the departure look hurried?
Should I go in for arson, perhaps arsenic,
Or just blow up my victim's apartment?
Decisions, decisions—I need something quick
For the EQ First Story Department.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

E. P. Moses' first story, "Death Angel," appeared in the March 1980 issue of EQMM and presented a unique detective. We won't say the criminal in this second story is unique, but to the best of our recollection the criminal's explanation is just that—unique . . .

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

by E. P. MOSES

If I was in the business of writing a dictionary instead of being a cop, under "henpecked" I would put "Harley Morgan." Or would have, I guess I should say, because his new wife, Sarah, is something different. He even looks taller nowadays. But the time I'm talking about was five years ago, when Harley was running the Brass Lantern Restaurant and Monica was running Harley. There isn't any Brass Lantern any more—it's called Harley's Café now, which is the sort of place it really was all along, except that Monica liked things fancy.

Monica was what you'd call a disappointed woman. The Brass Lantern had cloth napkins and menus with gold trim, but especially around three o'clock in the morning, at the end of November with the wind whipping up, Harley's Café is where I'd rather be. That was the season—late fall when dead leaves whirl down the sidewalks and you wonder if you'll live to see spring again—when the Lantern started getting held up and Monica made Harley buy the gun.

From reading the *Daily Mercury*, our local paper, you'd think that to get dragged into an alley and mugged you'd have to make a special trip to New York or Chicago. That happens to be a lot of nonsense. It's not something they mention in our Chamber of Commerce brochures, but if you wandered alone into the wrong part of Riverview, Illinois, population 16,200, after dark any night of the week, you'd be begging for trouble. It's not all local talent, of course. East St. Louis, which is a tough town, is not that far north of here,

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and some of those rednecks in Cairo, just 40 miles down the river, are still fighting the Civil War. So we get a lot of punks coming through, some just raising hell and others looking on Riverview as a kind of out-of-town bank.

I was off-duty at the time of the first holdup. When I dropped by later for a cup of coffee to break up the graveyard shift, I heard all about it. Except for Harley and Monica, there was nobody in the Brass Lantern but Sarah. She'd started as a waitress a month or so earlier, and she'd taken to staying on every night after work.

"How much did the guy get?" I asked.

"A hundred and ninety-six dollars," Monica said. "Can you believe it? And my big brave husband here never made a move to stop him."

Harley said, "He was a really big guy, maybe six-two. And he had a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun." It was always the same with him. If he had to tell Monica why he didn't take on a Sherman tank singlehanded, he'd sound like he was apologizing.

"That was the right move," I said. "I mean letting him walk away with it. The Department recommends that holdup victims do nothing that could endanger their lives or the lives of innocent bystanders."

It didn't do any good to try and sound official with Monica, though. Any friend of Harley's was a jerk to her. "That's easy to say when it's not your money," she said. "The man wasn't any six-two, he was a shrimp, and he was so nervous he was shaking. He was almost as scared as Harley was. All Harley had to do was walk up to him and take away the gun. If he was any kind of man at all he would have."

That was another thing she did: she talked about him as if he wasn't standing right across the counter from her. His head was hanging and his face was getting red, and with his hair turning gray he looked closer to 60 than 40. I felt sorry for him, but there was just nothing anybody could do. I didn't doubt that the holdup man was six-two or close to it. It was just that from where Monica stood all men were shrimps.

I'm not saying she was exactly tall. She stood maybe five-five, an inch shorter than Harley, stocky without being fat—handsome when she was young, I guess you could say, though never pretty—but that was just the part of her you could see. It was like she was a drill sergeant and all the men in the world were basic trainees; she had a voice like a drill sergeant's too. In a way I couldn't help admiring the holdup man. Even standing behind a double-barreled shotgun, with Monica glaring at me, I don't think I could have pulled it off.

Which reminded me—"How come you didn't try and stop him yourself?" I asked.

"That's man's work. But what am I saying? There aren't any men around here that I can see. And don't you think you've been loafing long enough on the city's time?"

"Just going," I muttered.

Sarah got up and went out with me. She was, and is, a quiet little lady, divorced with two kids, as different from Monica as any woman could be. At first you'd call her mousy. But pretty soon, after you'd known her for a while, you'd see the spark in her eyes. "I'll run you home," I said. The Brass Lantern was down by the tracks, not in a very good neighborhood. "Why do you keep staying there anyway?"

"Somebody has to. Why do you keep coming back?"

"The same reason, I guess." Which I had a feeling was more true in her case than mine. Because from the way she looked at him, the few minutes when Monica was in the kitchen and she had the chance, and the wistful way she talked about him, I could tell she was soft on Harley Morgan. He was on her, too. But if there ever was a romance more hopeless than that one, I hope I never see it.

At first, for maybe a week, she sat at the counter and Harley would wait on her. Then, as if Monica were physically shoving her away with her eyes, she took to sitting at a table out in the middle of the room, and finally she ended up in a back booth where to see Harley at all she had to crane her head around the corner. The way things were going, it looked as if by Christmas she'd be having her middle-of-the-night coffee out in the alley.

A week later the same guy hit them again, this time for \$126, and Monica said, "Harley is going to buy a pistol, and you, Officer Durrell, are going to do something useful for a change. You're going to teach him how to use it."

I glanced over at Harley, and I could see he was shaking. A guy tried to kill me with a gun once, and I wasn't half as scared then as I was at the thought of Harley Morgan standing up to a holdup man with a gun in his hand. "Have you ever fired a gun?" I asked.

"I've never even touched one."

"Then I would advise against it. What chance would you have against some punk that's been playing Billy the Kid since he was twelve?"

"That's where you come in," Monica said. "Harley will come to your house at four o'clock tomorrow afternoon, and you will go out together and buy it. I work too hard for my money to allow every

Tom, Dick, and Harry that walks in off the street to steal it."

I looked at Harley, and he looked down and shrugged. I looked over at Sarah, but she didn't even dare to do that much. The gun we bought was a Smith and Wesson revolver, a .38. I showed Harley how to load and unload it and which end the bullet came out of, and the whole time he handled it like it was a live rattlesnake. Finally he put it behind the counter in the restaurant.

For the next few nights, until he got used to it, he'd walk in a little circle around it, as if the vibrations from his footsteps could set it off. Monica walked around with a grim smile on her face. I had a feeling that if the holdup man decided to call it quits on the Brass Lantern it was going to be the disappointment of her life.

Evidently, though, she didn't put much faith in Harley's marksmanship. I couldn't blame her for that, of course. But it wasn't enough to just maybe wing this guy, or the next guy who tried anything—she was doing her damndest to make sure the holdup guy died. A couple of nights later when she went to the ladies' room, Harley came close to me and said, "You know what she did? She filed little crosses in the fronts of all the bullets and rubbed garlic powder into them."

"Hell, that's illegal," I said. "I can confiscate the weapon."

"No! She'd know I told you, Mike. She'd kill me."

"Then why *did* you tell me?"

"I don't know. I just needed for somebody to know. Listen, what do you think I'd better do?"

"Nothing. Just for God's sake don't try to shoot anybody." Which was all I had time for, because Monica was back, and the way she glared at me the Brass Lantern didn't seem altogether friendly. I moved over to the back booth with Sarah. Monica glanced down at where the pistol was—to make sure I hadn't talked Harley into getting rid of it, I guess—and I could tell she was gloating. I could picture a Sicilian hit man doctoring bullets like that to go after somebody who had ravaged his sister.

Which was how things stood—I'd taken to sitting in the back booth regularly now—when three days later the holdup man came in. It was late, nearly one o'clock on a cold dead Wednesday morning, and it was just me and Sarah and Harley and Monica. He was big, the way Harley had said, over six feet, and the muzzles of that twelve-gauge looked big as silver dollars. He had on a stocking mask, and the way he swung the gun around I thought for a minute he was going to spray the place just for the hell of it.

"Don't nobody move!" he said. "Lay it out on the counter, now!" His voice was tight, damn near out of control—I was pretty sure he was high on something. He was ready to go off like a bomb. And there was Harley, white-faced, dripping with sweat, looking not at the holdup man, but at Monica, and Monica glaring back at him.

If Harley was going to make a move, at least he had an angle. I mean, the guy had to swing the gun almost ninety degrees to cover all of us, and with me in uniform and a .38 in sight on my hip he was naturally paying more attention to me than to anyone else. I wasn't planning to do a damn thing, though, not with Sarah right in the line of fire. I had my hands on the table where he could see them. Meanwhile, Monica was still glaring at Harley and jerking her chin at that gun so hard you could practically hear it. The holdup man was sort of twitching. He said, "Quit stalling. Move!"

When Harley moved it was away from the gun and toward the cash register, and I figured that was it. We'd make it now. He was facing me, and to get where he was going he had to pass behind Monica. By this time she'd turned to where I couldn't see her face any more, so for just a second they were eye to eye. Right then, they being practically the same height, the holdup man was screened. I could see Harley's eyes from where I was and I'll remember what I saw until the day I die—Harley glancing over at the gun and then back at her, saying louder than in words, if you want him shot, *you* shoot him.

Monica looked after him, watching him while he opened the cash register, as if he was something slimy that had died ten days ago. Pure loathing. Then I could see she was going to try it. She strolled back to where the gun was, trying to look casual and managing it quite well. If the holdup man hadn't had to watch all four of us I don't think she'd have made it. Of course it might have helped that he didn't know her; to him she was just another dame who happened to run a restaurant. Her right hand dropped out of sight behind the counter and I could see the muscles tense along her arm.

It was then I decided I had to do something to give her some kind of edge. Not go for my gun—that would have got Sarah and me killed for sure and maybe all four of us. I said "Sarah!" low and sharp and jerked my thumb straight down. She wasn't slow. She slid right off the seat and hit the deck under the table. It would do two things, I figured. It would get her out of the way and the movement might distract the holdup guy just long enough to give Monica the time she needed.

It worked, too. He swung the shotgun our way, and by the time he saw what was happening Monica had the .38 up over the counter. She pulled the trigger. There was a dry dead click. Then the twelve-gauge went off and she took both barrels in the chest.

At first all I could think was, thank God it was both barrels. It couldn't have mattered to her, but if he'd had one left I hate to think what would have happened. As it was he was out the door before I could move, and Harley was being sick all over the floor. When I saw what was left of Monica I got sick too. But something else was nagging at me by now, so before I even called it in I went looking for Harley's gun. It took a while to find it, because it had flown back into the kitchen and was under one of the ovens. It hadn't misfired—it was empty.

Harley and Sarah got married six months later, a year after that they had a baby girl, and now Harley looks 40 again even though he's turned 45. Which, all put together, is why Harley's Café is a nice place to come to and sit at the counter, talk, and drink some coffee when it's cold and dark out.

For a while after it happened, though, things weren't so easy between Harley and me. That next week the Brass Lantern was closed, of course, so I visited Harley at home. The whole scene was nagging and nagging at me. Finally I said, "Listen, we've been friends for ten years now, right?"

"We have."

"So why did you tell Monica to go for the gun?"

"I don't know. I guess I was tired of being robbed too. And my God, between her and me which one had a better chance?"

"She didn't have *any* chance," I said. "You put her up against that crazy holdup guy with an *empty* gun. The law can't touch you for it, but you killed her."

I shouldn't have talked to him like that. Losing somebody you've lived with for fifteen years—and losing her that way—is an awful shock, even if it's somebody like Monica. But I was upset with the whole world just then. Chief Gormly had suspended me for a week for what he called "failure to take appropriate action to safeguard the lives and property of the citizens under your jurisdiction."

Harley didn't say anything for a few minutes. His face took on that blank stubborn look people get when they've decided they aren't talking and they want their lawyer. Finally he said, "I'm sorry, Officer." Officer! To me, the best friend he has in the world.

He said, "I'm sorry, Officer. I didn't know it was unloaded."

DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Charles R. McConnell's first story, "The Last of Johnny," appeared in the March 1978 issue of EQMM. His second story tells of an uncle and his nephew caught in a tight situation . . .

LIKE FATHER LIKE SON

by **CHARLES R. McCONNELL**

66 **W**hat was that about somebody getting shot, Uncle Pete?" Rob Olin asked as he stepped through the kitchen door.

Peter Olin turned from the citizen's-band scanner. He was tall and lean, almost gaunt. Deep creases scored his leathery cheeks.

"Payroll robbery at Booker's Cannery a half hour ago, and—" He held up a broad palm as the scanner again caught an active channel.

The two men stood listening as three additional transmissions gave them pieces of the story. Peter was intent on the face of the scanner. Rob bent and placed a heavy socket-wrench handle on the floor beside the door. He stepped closer to the radio, wiping his greasy hands on a rag.

Two holdup men had taken "an undetermined amount of money" at Booker's, the county's largest cannery. After trading shots with a security guard they got away before the sheriff's men could get there. The Olins were hearing bits of search instructions and bulletins to neighboring law-enforcement agencies.

"Got a bundle of money, sounds like," Peter said.

"Who did they shoot?"

"Nobody. A payroll guard started the shooting. They think one of the holdup men was hit getting into a van."

"I didn't think anybody dealt with cash payrolls these days." Rob scrubbed away at a streak of grease on his wrist.

"Don't kid yourself, Robbie. This isn't the big city you're—you're so fond of." Rob stopped rubbing and looked up.

Peter continued, "Places around here still do a lot of cash business,

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especially the canneries with their seasonal help and the small growers who like to collect in cash." Looking at the young man standing with feet apart, gray work shirt open and faded jeans streaked with grease, Peter could think only: *Lord, how he looks like his dad.*

And Peter knew Rob was about to resume their open-end conversation of the previous evening.

"Uncle Pete?"

"You finished with the pickup, Rob?"

Without expression the young man stared at his uncle for several seconds. At last he resumed wiping his hands and said, "I think so. I had to monkey with the thermostat. I left it running to warm up, so I'll know in a few minutes."

Peter sighed, a tired, lingering rush of air. "I shouldn't have done that, Robbie. But I know what you're going to talk about, and I don't want you to go."

"I need to try something else for a while, Uncle Pete. I feel like if I don't get away I'll—I'll rot, or something." Rob snapped the rag against the leg of his jeans.

Peter's dark eyes narrowed. "You're a good kid, Robbie. Except for some damn-fool stuff now and then you've always been a good kid, and you're a hard worker. But I'm not just your uncle. I'm your legal guardian, and that goes until you're twenty-one—ten more months."

"I know."

"More important is what I owe my brother. Your father. I promised him I'd see to raising you properly, and I intend to see it through."

"You have."

Peter looked intently at the young man. Rob had his hands on his hips, his lanky frame motionless. *He's your boy through and through, Karl*, Peter thought. *He'd drive you crazy but you'd love him.*

"Wait until you're twenty-one, Rob. I'll feel better about it." Peter was worried. The boy had never gone against his wishes, at least not in the long run, but never before had he held out for so long. He had his father's determination.

"I'd like to go in about three weeks, when we're done with the apples. But I want it to be with your permission."

Peter gripped the back of a chair with one hand and drew his free hand through his thinning hair. The occasional crackle of the scanner might have come from the charged air in the room.

"Robbie, I—" Peter faltered. Part of him was prepared to deliver

a flat irrevocable "no," and declare the subject closed. Yet he was unwilling to take the risk of pushing the young man into a corner; he had seen his brother in too many corners.

"Ah, shoot," Peter said at last. "We'll talk about it when the apples are done." He straightened up and added, "Now, how about supper? Steak and home fries?"

Rob smiled. "Sure, Uncle Pete. I'll go check out the pickup and shut it off. Be right back."

Rob left the house and Peter busied himself with the meal. He laid a pair of steaks on a broiler tray and started peeling potatoes. From two more scanner transmissions he learned that the payroll bandits were still at large.

Peter had potatoes and onions sizzling in butter and was ready to turn up the broiler flame, but Rob had not yet returned. He glanced at the clock—fifteen minutes since the boy went out. Not like him; more like—Peter was ashamed of the sudden thought but could not stop it: *He's run off. Just like Karl did when dad said no.*

"Uncle Pete." The voice was strained, not at all like Rob's.

Peter turned. Rob, a streak of blood across his right cheek, advanced haltingly into the kitchen prodded by a revolver in the hand of a slight young man no older than Rob himself.

"They got guns, Uncle Pete. And money. They took the cannery payroll, and they want the station wagon."

Peter's heart leaped. His first concern was for Robbie; he wanted to reach out and wipe the blood from his nephew's face. With a harshness he didn't intend he said, "You. Stop poking that thing in his back."

The stranger's eyes widened. He jerked backward, but the revolver remained leveled at Rob's back.

"You heard him," the gunman said. "I want the keys to your wagon right now." His voice was soft, almost effeminate.

Peter looked at Rob's face, at the grim line of the mouth and the flush of indignation rising in the cheeks. Karl would have taken a chance and jumped the man, revolver be damned, and Peter feared for the youth who was too like the father for his own good.

Rob jerked his head toward his captor and said, "He jumped me when I was getting out of the pickup. There's two of them, and they've got a van out behind the tractor shed."

"With bullet holes in the gas tank," the young stranger said.

Peter looked from Rob to the youth. "Two? Where's the other?"

"Outside. Waiting."

Rob said, "In the back of the station wagon, Uncle Pete. He's been shot, and they made me help move him."

"I want the keys to your wagon," the gunman repeated. He prodded Rob. "You. Get over there next to your uncle. Go slow."

Peter watched his nephew's face. Rob's eyes narrowed and his upraised hands dropped below shoulder height, and although he moved slowly he appeared tense for action. Peter wanted to speak out, to caution Rob against doing something foolish. With his eyes he begged Rob to take no chances.

The scanner crackled an unheard message.

Peter lived a lifetime as Rob advanced, taut and seeming intent on gauging the distance to the menace behind him. It was Karl all over again, Karl stalking an animal.

As Rob neared Peter their eyes met. *No, Robbie*, Peter thought, willing the plea to his nephew. *I don't want you to die.*

Rob stared at Peter. He had stopped moving.

"Get," the gunman ordered.

The grim line of Rob's mouth dissolved and the tension seemed to drain from his body. He stepped forward, turned, and stood shoulder to shoulder with Peter.

The gun wavered as the holdup man sniffed the air. "What's that?"

"Potatoes," Peter answered. He nodded his head toward the stove. "They're burning."

"Turn them off."

Peter shut off the gas flame and set the pan aside.

"Your keys," the gunman demanded.

Carefully Peter took a key ring from his overalls. He stretched out his arm and laid the keys on the edge of the kitchen table.

The gunman's eyes flicked about the room, pausing in turn on the keys, the telephone, and the scanner. He said, "The wagon needs gas—I put a stick in the tank. I want to know how to work your pumps."

Peter nodded toward the keys. "The smallest key unlocks both pumps. They work just like a gas station's."

"You ever kill anyone?" Rob asked. His words, calm and deliberate, caught Peter by surprise.

Peter watched the young stranger. Perspiration lent a shine to his hollow cheeks and glued the locks of his unruly hair to his forehead. His gun hand trembled and a tic pulled at the corner of his mouth.

"What if I haven't! You want to be first?" The gunman's voice

cracked. He moved the gun to bear directly on Rob.

Peter watched Rob out of the corner of his eye. Not a flicker of reaction. Cool.

"How you going to do it all?" Rob asked.

"What?"

"Everything. Gas up the car, tie us—or lock us up. And I saw the shape your brother's in—you'll have to drive."

The stranger's eyes darted from man to man. A look of panic flooded his features and the muzzle of the gun wavered between Peter and Rob.

"Easy, son," said Peter, "we're not going to try to stop you."

To Rob he added, "Don't stir things up, Robbie. I'll help them gas up and they can be on their way." Peter took a tentative step forward.

"No!"

Peter stopped. The gun jerked toward Rob. "*You* fill the car. Tell my brother what you're doing and stay where he can see you. He'll have a shotgun pointed at your head, and he likes to shoot."

The gunman swept the keys off the table and tossed them to Rob. He jerked his head toward the door. "Go on."

Rob moved. Peter watched the nervous stranger step back from Rob's path, apparently so he would not be caught between the two of them. He backed nearly to the end of the kitchen. His head jerked from side to side as he sought to keep both Rob and Peter covered.

Rob paused at the outside door. His head went down slightly; it seemed to Peter as though his nephew was looking for the socket-wrench handle beside the door. Again he sensed—or feared—what Rob might do.

"Hey, boy," Peter snapped to the stranger.

The gunman's head jerked toward Peter. Peter saw Rob bend and retrieve the handle and shield it with his body.

"Don't call me 'boy'," the gunman growled.

"You know the roads around here?" Peter asked. "You could run right into a roadblock if you don't."

The stranger turned back toward Rob, who was stepping through the doorway, and called out, "Five minutes, that's all you got. Your uncle's just a squeeze away from dying until you get back. Leave the door open. I hear something I don't like, I shoot."

When Rob was out of sight the gunman said, "Uncle, we ain't so dumb that we don't know where we're going and how to get there." His grin revealed fine, even teeth, curiously out of keeping with his generally unhealthy appearance.

Peter pictured his nephew armed with the wrench handle, seeking an opportunity. *Always foolish risks, like Karl. Acting without thinking.* Unlike his brother, Peter would have thought far better to send the armed strangers on their way and let the sheriff catch them.

A minute passed, then two minutes. No sound came from outdoors, and the kitchen was silent except for the faint whir of the kitchen clock. The odor of burned potatoes hung in the air.

Into the third minute the gunman said, "You have any rope? Or some heavy tape?"

"Friction tape," said Peter. "In the drawer behind me."

"Move away. I'll get it." The stranger edged across the kitchen, opened the drawer, and removed a large roll of black tape.

The sweep hand on the clock entered the fourth minute.

"Okay, it's filled." Rob's voice fell like a rock in a still pond; Peter and the gunman looked toward the door.

"Your brother has the keys," Rob added.

A tremor of relief ran through Peter. *Thank God, he didn't try anything.*

"Is my brother okay?"

"He's hurting, but he's okay enough to move around in the wagon." Rob directed his next words to Peter: "He kept a shotgun less than three feet from my head the whole time."

"That's my brother!" The young gunman's voice cracked adolescently. "Now you—kid—turn around and put your wrists together. Uncle, tape him up good and tight."

Rob and Peter did as instructed. When Rob was secured the gunman said, "Okay, Uncle, wrap a few turns around your left wrist, then turn around."

The gunman pressed the revolver into Peter's back and with his free hand completed the binding job.

"Okay. Turn around."

"You got what you need," Peter said. "Now you can go away and leave us alone."

A look of intense anger crossed the gunman's face and he raised the revolver and pointed it directly at Peter's head.

Peter found his eyes drawn by the black hole of the gun barrel. He waited, suddenly cold, suppressing his breathing. Waited for the little black hole to take his life away.

The black hole wavered and became smaller. The gunman was backing slowly toward the door.

The revolver pointed to the scanner.

The radio had sputtered again. "Can you send on that thing?"

"No," Rob answered.

The gunman glared at the scanner, then looked at the telephone.

The gun roared twice and both bullets smashed into the face of the scanner. "Just in case."

The telephone was the next target. The roar of the weapon mingled with the discordant clang of the phone's bell. Streaks of smoke formed a thin curtain between captor and captives.

The gunman turned and sprinted out the door. A few seconds later an engine roared into life and spinning tires threw gravel. The sound of the departing car faded quickly.

"Turn around, Uncle Pete. Back to back. I think my fingers can move enough to get you untied."

They went to work on their bonds. "Robbie, you scared me to death when you took the wrench. I had all I could do to keep him from seeing you take it."

"Couldn't use it, anyway."

"Why?"

"Because of a white knuckle on the trigger of a twelve-gauge shotgun. I'm no dummy."

Peter's hands were free. He went to work on the tape around Rob's wrists. "Good sense, Robbie. Let the sheriff get them."

"I think *we* got them *for* the sheriff. Hurry up with my hands. We've got to get over to Casey's and use the telephone."

"How's that? *We* got them?" Peter threw the last of the tape aside.

Rob flexed his fingers and smiled. It was the way Karl used to smile when he was up to something.

"The station wagon's going to quit within a mile or two of here. I filled them up with diesel fuel."

"I'll be damned," Peter said in wonder.

"Come on, let's go call the sheriff."

They strode from the house into the twilight. "I'll be damned," Peter repeated. "Diesel fuel! I never would have thought of that."

"Sure you would have, Uncle Pete, as soon as you saw your own two pumps side by side next to the wagon. Wasn't it you always telling me to use my head without sticking my neck out?"

There was spring in Peter's step as he strode toward the pickup truck. He smiled to himself and shook his head. Karl, rest his soul, was gone, the victim of his own restlessness. But Robbie was alive—and well.

He's a good boy, Karl. I'll miss him around here.

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

CURRYING FAVOR: It is often difficult to identify the first appearance of an author's book. A paperback may give every evidence of being a totally new work until one learns that ten years previous the novel or short-story collection was published in hardcover—perhaps under a different title. The reference tool that serves to distinguish between first and later editions—the bibliography—is one of the greatest assets to a reference library, whether publicly or privately owned. The thing of it is that bibliography is an exact and very demanding labor, and few are capable of handling it.

L. W. Currey has just endeared himself to thousands of collectors and scholars by compiling, after many years of assiduous toil, *Science Fiction and Fantasy Authors: A Bibliography of First Printings of Their Fiction* (G. K. Hall, \$48.00). It is mentioned here because many writers worked both in the genre suggested by the book's title and in the world of mystery—Fredric Brown, for example, and Robert Bloch, John Collier, and Harlan Ellison, among others.

An invaluable book, and produced

to last through the years of heavy use it is bound to have.

ALL ABOARD: If you are a true fan of the mystery story, it is presumed that you have read just about all of Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, and a pretty fair sampling of G. K. Chesterton, Freeman Wills Crofts, and other British writers who so excelled at their craft that they were invited to join London's highly prestigious Detection Club. A new paperback edition (the first in a cheap format) has just been issued by Charter (\$2.50) of a novel that may be new to even the more serious fan. *The Floating Admiral*, reprinted by Gregg Press (\$9.95) in hardcover last year, is a round-robin novel written by "Certain Members of the Detection Club," including those listed above. There is a unique quality to the compilation that makes it essential for everyone interested in detective fiction.

POE-TENT COLLECTION: Looking for new reading material is often a chancy avocation, frequently abetted by recommendations. Quite likely the best recommendation for a book or story is the information that it has been awarded an Edgar Allan Poe

Award from the Mystery Writers of America. Is it possible, then, to imagine a more highly recommended anthology than a collection comprised entirely of Edgar-winning stories? That heavenly blend has just been assembled by Bill Pronzini. *The Edgar Winners* (Random House, \$11.95) is the 33rd annual anthology of the Mystery Writers of America and the biggest yet. Many of the stories have been frequently anthologized (deservedly) but some have fallen into obscurity, to be resurrected here in their proper setting. Surely one of the finest anthologies ever published.

PULPULAR FICTION: Several writers of the 1930s and 1940s achieved the kind of popular success that better-known (and, let's face it, better) writers never dreamed of having. These were the big names of the pulp magazine field, and few names were at the same lofty level as Lester Dent, the creator of Doc Savage (under the Kenneth Robeson pseudonym) and many other series detectives under his own name and several others. Pulp Press has just published two Dent novels in book form for the first time, reviving two humorous mysteries originally published in *Argosy* magazine: *Hades & Hocus Pocus* (\$12.95, available directly from the publisher at 10606 So. Central Park, Chicago, IL 60655). This attractive volume (the dust jacket is by the talented Frank Hamilton) was limited to 1,000 copies. The same publishing company has been reissuing other pulp novels in paper covers (\$7.95 each) featuring *The Spider* and *Operator #5* (with such understated titles as *Scourge of the Invisible Death* and *Overlord of the*

Damned). They bring back another era, to be certain.

ODDS AND ENDS: Richard Levinson and William Link, the Edgar-winning writers, creators, and producers of many of television's finest hours, including the *Columbo* series, have written a crime drama which (it is to be fervently hoped) will already be on Broadway when this appears.

Simon Brett, whose Charles Paris detective novels have become more and more popular with each succeeding volume, has finished the sixth in the series; it is to be published in England in June and the United States in September. He plans one a year in that series and expects to write other kinds of books at the same time.

One of the best-kept secrets of recent times is the true identity of the pseudonymous Trevanian, the best-selling author of such popular successes as *The Eiger Sanction* and *The Loo Sanction*, the truly brilliant novel, *The Main*, and the more recent *Shibumi*. Rumors abounded, crediting virtually every major writer of espionage fiction with his books. He is not Robert Ludlum (the most persistent of the rumors), nor is he Len Deighton or John le Carré. We have learned his true identity and will provide further information in a later column. For the moment—just this: he is a professor at a university in the eastern United States.

The third Sam Briscoe novel by Pete Hamill has been completed and is in the hands of his publisher, Bantam.

Can you believe that there are unpublished detective stories by Dashiell Hammett? It's true. They

reside in manuscript form at the University of Texas but cannot appear in print without the permission of Lillian Hellman, Hammett's literary executor, who has refused it thus far.

In a past column, we hailed the forthcoming edition of A. A. Milne's *The Red House Mystery*, but incorrectly named the publisher as Vintage; it is to be reprinted by Dell. Also

coming from Dell are Anthony Berkeley's *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, Robert Barnard's *Death of a Mystery Writer*, and other recent or vintage detective novels. All will be welcome additions to the bookstore racks.

A contract has been signed to permit the production of a first-rate, big-budget movie about *The Shadow*.

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"Q"

BLOODY VISIONS

by **CHRIS STEINBRUNNER**

"I could live life more intensely as a cop," Joseph Wambaugh reflects. "In a single night I sometimes learned things that a man could not expect to learn in a month or a year." Some nights. In such titles as *The New Centurions* and *The Onion Field*—both his books and the films made from them—Wambaugh presents grim insights into the dark world of the police officer, its corruptions and despairs. Now he has turned to comedy, and *The Black Marble* is a love story between cops: how a down-to-earth woman sergeant is partnered with a dreamer who gradually melts her tough reserve. The film is humorous and romantic, but the world in which these two unite is just as dark as any Wambaugh landscape.

"Why do some people in this world always have to pick the black mar-

ble?" moans Itchy Mitch, the small-time crook on a nervous visit—"for possession"—to the squad room, and the remark sets the tone for the film.

Detective Valnikov (Robert Foxworth) is a very unlikely hero: melancholy, a dreamer plagued with daytime nightmares who drinks too much ("his eyes don't stop watering until two o'clock in the afternoon"). When he is first teamed up with the sleek, down-to-earth Sergeant Natalie Zimmerman (Paula Prentiss) he is overjoyed: "It's good to have a partner to talk to again." She doesn't think so; she thinks Valnikov's a "nut."

Actually, the rest of the squad room seems composed of aberrant types, too, on a squint-eyed prow through a city of failures in which even the crimes have a pathetic air

to them. For instance, the major villain of the film is the extortionist kidnaper of a show dog whose first offense this is, having been driven to it by compulsive gambling and mounting indebtedness to his bookie. He is more to be pitied than scorned. The cops are to be pitied also.

Natalie, toughened by her own problems, begins to understand that Valnikov is a "gentle, gentle man" being pulled down by his troubles, many of which involve his prior years in Homicide, and his former partner's attitude toward the savage cruelties police must witness: "It all goes down a big sewer in the end." The partner was Charlie Lightfoot, who "was killed in a hunting accident, they say, all alone in the woods." This is the familiar Wambaugh cop-suicide, accomplished or attempted in nearly all of his films and books, the cynicism and despair which result because the public believes cops are macho and cannot break under stress.

We learn a good deal about Valnikov and Zimmerman and even the late Charlie Lightfoot before the end of the film—a finish containing a breakdown and self-realization quite harrowing for a supposed romantic comedy—but happily, despite the seamy canvas of their world, this

time the two lovers manage to avoid the black marble.

Others are not as lucky, and Al Pacino in *Cruising* is a policeman who strikes out. William Friedkin, who won an Academy Award for *The French Connection* which dealt in part with cops corrupted by their labors, and who more recently directed *The Brinks Job*, an elaborate reconstruction of a famous robbery, here has tackled with wide-eyed violence the case (vaguely based on actual Homicide files) of an undercover policeman assigned to investigate a series of homosexual killings of a Jack-the-Ripper sort. Billed as "a murder mystery" but actually a Dante's Inferno journey into a repulsive night world, the movie has Pacino in fact catch his crazed killer but in the process pay a terrible price, moving from clear-eyed innocent toward a finale which Wambaugh would understand: a Grand Guignol in which the cop even in triumph becomes victim, so stained he will never be the same again.

What Wambaugh says much better than Friedkin's garish *Cruising*, however, is that *his* police—even though they too prowl authentic and pervasive nether regions—can at least sometimes escape with hope and honor, souls intact.

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"Q"

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

This month offers a feast for amateur legal buffs like me. Three new novels examine systems of jurisprudence in the past (ancient Greece), the present (contemporary Boston), and the future (the moon). Two of the three even spend a respectable amount of time in the courtroom.

**** Margaret Doody: *Aristotle Detective*, Harper and Row, \$10.95. Of the many attempts to turn historical figures into fictional detectives, this is one of the very best. Aristotle emerges as a three-dimensional character; the structure of Athenian society is fascinatingly delineated; the detective puzzle is sound and fair. Above all, Doody's writing (through the mouth of a former student of Aristotle who must defend a cousin accused of murder) is eloquent and beautiful. The trial scenes depict a system of justice unlike our own but in its way quite effective. The advocates (not professional lawyers) for the two sides take a solemn oath that is truly harrowing. (See page 241 of the book.)

**** George V. Higgins: *Kennedy for the Defense*, Knopf, \$9.95. The purposely banal title is doubly ironic, for lawyer Jerry Kennedy (unlike TV's *Judd for the Defense* or John Dickson Carr's *Patrick Butler for the Defense*) usually defends not the unjustly accused but sleazy professional criminals, and throughout the book we never see him argue a case in court. Higgins' novel conveys a strong feeling of the ambivalent moral

position of the successful criminal lawyer. I was surprised to find that the first-person narration and some of the dialogue reminded me very much of Rex Stout, though Kennedy goes in for more scatology than Archie Goodwin ever did.

*** Larry Niven: *The Patchwork Girl*, Ace, \$5.95. Gil (the ARM) Hamilton, hero of an earlier novelet collection, is a delegate to a Lunar Law conference in his first book-length case. When murder strikes, the resulting adventure is both pure detection and pure science fiction. The scientific, legal, and social extrapolations seem more successful than the mystery plot, but fans of both genres should be satisfied. (The name of one character, Chris Penzler, will seem oddly familiar to *EQMM* readers. This is an example of "Tuckerizing," after mystery-s.f. writer Wilson Tucker, who frequently names characters after friends.)

**** Peter Dickinson: *One Foot in the Grave*, Pantheon, \$8.95. Few novels of recent years are as strong in all departments—plot, pace, style, characterization, theme—as this latest from a distinguished British author. Jimmy Pibble, police sleuth of the author's early novels, is now retired and, seemingly senile before his time, a patient in a high-class nursing home called Flycatchers. During an abortive suicide attempt, he finds a body in the building's tower, beginning his gradual return to detection and a meaningful life. The novel is rich in insights into the

old and sick and contains some exceptionally fine prose.

*** Bill Granger: *Public Murders*, Jove, \$1.95. In a strong specimen of the large-canvas big-city crime novel, set in a vividly realized Chicago, Granger shows both the police procedure and the legal and political pressures involved in the search for a killer of young women.

*** Elizabeth Peters: *The Love Talker*, Dodd Mead, \$8.95. A specialist in funny gothics with a dash of detection—not at all a bad combination—presents a case involving some fairy photographs similar to (but much better than) the ones devoutly believed in by A. Conan Doyle. It's well plotted, with some twists that will satisfy even when anticipated, and for parody fans, Peters manages brief swipes at sword-and-sorcery fantasy and sweet-savage historical romance.

*** James Sherburne: *Death's Pale Horse*, Houghton Mifflin, \$8.95. Isaac Murphy, the famed black jockey of the late nineteenth century, is a major character in this fine historical mystery, set in Saratoga and involving a match race between two great (and fictitious) thoroughbreds, Tenstrike and The Mogul. Narrator-journalist Paddy Moretti, who must turn detective to save his job, is a character worth meeting again.

*** Lionel Black: *The Penny Mur-*

ders, Avon, \$1.95. The apparently impossible murder (in a house protected by an elaborate system of burglar alarms) of a coin collector provides Kate and Henry Theobald with another comfortable English puzzle, conventional to the last but nicely done and full of interesting numismatic conversation.

** Mignon G. Eberhart: *Casa Madrone*, Random House, \$8.95. Though there are some irresistible elements in Eberhart's latest historical melodrama—a cross-country trip by private railroad car and a view of 1906 San Francisco before, during, and after the earthquake and fire—it falls far short of her best. Though the disaster is nicely handled, the mystery plot tends to lose impetus in the second half of the book, seeming anticlimactic after the shock of the earthquake.

** Stanton Forbes: *The Will and Last Testament of Constance Cobble*, Doubleday-Crime Club, \$7.95. Though the blurb-writer apparently would not agree, this is the kind of book that is spoiled by too much summary. Set on the Caribbean island of St. Martin, it concerns a mystery writer and the craft of mystery writing. Like others by the author, it is brief and easy reading, vaguely sketchy in its development. Ultimately, it's an interesting experiment that doesn't quite come off.

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"Q"

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HOF133

THE EDINBURGH LANDLADY

by **AUBREY DAVIDSON**

Now Jenny, bolt the outer door and trim the candle's light.
Outside the wind blows bitter and you *must* stay home tonight.
For just beyond the hospital, two killers idly lurk—
The name of one is Mr. Hare, the other Mr. Burke.

Slung across their hand cart
Rests a coffin box
That carries pretty ladies
Along to Dr. Knox.

Now Jenny, do as you are bidden for your own protection.
You know the Sawbones pays in gold for bodies for dissection.
The poor souls go to Heaven from the house in Surgeons' Square
To buy a flask of gin for Mr. Burke and Mr. Hare.

Remember Mary Haldane
With her golden locks:
A pretty lady till she went
Along to Dr. Knox.

Now Jenny, close the shutters fast and do not leave your bed.
I hear the church gate creaking and they're bringing out the dead.
It means the body snatchers are at their loathsome work,
And the best known of them all are Mr. Hare and Mr. Burke.

One's a savage tiger
And one's an artful fox,
But both take pretty ladies
Along to Dr. Knox.

Now Jenny's fast asleep and from the door I softly call.
I draw aside the bolt and let two shadows cross the hall.
My finger on my lips, I point the way toward the stair—
I get well paid for helping Mr. Burke and Mr. Hare.

Such innocence and folly
The Beast of Fortune mocks!
For I send *all* my ladies
Along to Dr. Knox.

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a **NEW Schlock Homes story by**

ROBERT L. FISH

Do you have an especially mysterious and difficult problem to solve? By any method—deduction, induction, cryptography, or a spot of ratiocination? Then call for Mr. Schlock Homes, the Master of Masterly Logic and the Apotheosis of Analytical Analysis. . .

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BELLES LETTERS

by **ROBERT L. FISH**

It was a warm sunny day in late June in the year '79 and both my friend Mr. Schlock Homes and myself were taking our ease in our quarters at 221-B Bagel Street, Homes softly humming the canonade from the 1812 Overture, while I cheerfully went over my financial statements for the Internal Revenue Service. Homes was entitled to his relaxation; he had just returned from a strenuous trip to the Malay Peninsula where he had gone at the behest of the Archipelago Administration to investigate the mysterious population explosion that had gripped one of the principal islands, a case I find delineated in my journal as *The Adventure of the Giant Rut of Sumatra*.

But little did we know, as we idly passed the time, that very shortly we would be engaged on a case that would make all of Homes's previous intricate analyses appear minor in comparison to the insulsiy he was able to exhibit in the affair I find annotated in my casebook as *The Adventure of the Belles Letters*.

I had just moved a decimal point to the left in my INCOME column and was contemplating moving one to the right in my EXPENSES

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column in order to be fair about it, when there came the sound of footsteps upon the stairs, and a moment later our page had opened the door to admit none other than Inspector Lestoil of Scotland Yard. The Inspector stood without speaking, twisting his bowler in his hands, obviously perturbed to be forced once again to seek the help of a person the Yard considered more hebetudinous than fortuitous in his solution of problems. Homes smiled at Lestoil cordially.

"Pray take the basket chair, Inspector," said he, "and let me know what is on your mind. I see you have recently visited the Buddhist monastery in Jubblepore in India, since the mould on the left side of your brogan grows only on the northeast side of the temple there, to my knowledge."

"I had to stop at a pharmaceutical factory making some of those new so-called wonder drugs the other day," Lestoil replied, seating himself. "You would think they would sweep the floor once in a while! But I am not here to discuss drugs this time, Mr. Homes. I am here because there has been murder done, and murder most foul! And to be honest with you, we at the Yard are at a complete loss!"

"Ah," said Homes with a smile, rubbing his hands in a manner that indicated either his intense interest in a case of capital dimensions, or that Mrs. Essex had once again failed to furnish dry towels for the bathroom. "Pray give me the details."

"Yes. Well," the Inspector said, bringing forth his notebook and referring to it, "the victim was a Mrs. Janet Belles, who lived with her husband, Robert—a collector of coins and stamps—in one of those new high-rise apartment buildings in St. John's Wood, a place called Subterranean Towers. Mrs. Belles was found lying over one of those game boards that are so popular these days. Her head had been bludgeoned."

Homes was paying close attention. "I see. Was her husband present at the time?"

"Unfortunately no, and therefore can furnish us with no information of value. He was in a different part of the apartment and returned to the game room to find his wife dead, at which point he says he immediately notified the authorities."

"I see." Homes frowned. "But surely as the victim's husband he must have some opinion! What sort of man is he?"

Lestoil considered the question for several moments before answering. "A smallish man in size, and rather browbeaten by his wife, if the neighbors are to be believed. Still, there are people who

stand for that, especially when the wife has all the money."

"I mean, what is he like?"

"Rather absent-minded, I should say," Lestoil replied with a frown on his face. "After calling us he immediately repaired to the basement of the building, where we found him stuffing his dressing-gown into the gas furnace which he had lit, completely forgetting that this is the month of June. And also," the Inspector added, recalling something else, "all during our interview he kept polishing the poker from their apartment fireplace, completely overlooking the fact that winter is still many months away."

"He could, of course, simply be a person who does not like to leave things to the last minute," Homes said thoughtfully, and shrugged. "However, let us forget the husband and continue. What else can you tell me of the case?"

Inspector Lestoil hesitated a moment and then sighed. He reached into his pocket and brought out three small squares of polished wood, each with a letter stamped on it. "These were found clutched in the hand of the victim. I'm sure they have nothing to do with the case," he said, "but I know your mania for having every little bit of possible evidence, so I brought them along." And he laid them upon the table. I came to stand beside Homes to stare at the tiny squares of polished wood. The letters that faced us were B, B, and O.

Homes frowned at the strange sight for a moment and then looked up at the Inspector curiously. "Were there any other bits of wood with letters on them in evidence?"

"Oh, yes! Many," the Inspector said. "It appears the game she was involved in at the time of her demise was concerned with the placing of letters on a board for the purpose of forming words. However," he added hastily, "the only letters she was clutching were these three." He leaned forward anxiously, gripping his bowler tightly, considering Homes earnestly. "Do you think they might possibly be a clue, Mr. Homes?"

"Quite possibly," Homes replied, and fell into a brown study, staring intently at the three letters, while Inspector Lestoil and I both wondered what possible conclusion Homes could hope to come to with those three simple letters as his only clue. At last Homes turned to his reference shelf to withdraw a heavy dictionary; a few moments of consulting with it and he returned it to the shelf, nodded his head, and spoke in a manner as if to himself. "There are possibilities. . . They will require verification, of course. . ."

"But, Homes!" I exclaimed. "What could you possibly see in those three little letters that could give a lead in this case?"

Homes smiled, but it was a cold, grim smile.

"Those letters say much," said he, and turned to Lestoil. "If I am not mistaken, Inspector, you will find your criminal to be a large man with flat feet, red cheeks, addicted to the wearing of ornate clothing, and with a penchant for blowing whistles. He also, of course," Homes added with the air of one wishing to be quite factual, "can obviously be vicious at times, as witness this murder he has committed."

Inspector Lestoil was staring at Homes with a look of incredulity on his face. I could see his mind beginning to come to the conclusion that Homes was making sport of him.

"Really, Homes!" I said chidingly. "It does nothing to play the fool in a case involving murder!"

"No, no, Watney," Homes said impatiently, coming to his feet. "I am quite serious. At the moment there is much to be done, or otherwise I would be happy to explain all to you." He turned to the Inspector. "If you will wait until I change to other raiment, I shall be pleased to return to the scene of the crime with you."

He moved in the direction of his room, beginning to remove his dressing-gown as he did so. When he reappeared a few minutes later, I stared. Homes was wearing an old overcoat held together with safety-pins over long underwear, leaving a goodly bit of thin cotton-covered shank visible; and on his head was a battered trilby.

"Homes!" I cried in delight. "What an original disguise! What are you supposed to be?"

"A man whose landlady sent all his suits to the cleaners at one time," he said sourly. "You might pick them up for me, since I understand you have arranged for tickets this evening at Albert Hall, and I could scarcely go in this guise."

"Ah, yes," I said. "I had forgotten. Dmitri Shostakovich."

"Dmitri Shostakovich?" Homes queried, frowning, and then shrugged. "In time I undoubtedly could solve that, but one case at a time," and he led the way down the steps with Inspector Lestoil at his heels.

I had had a busy afternoon, what with picking up Homes's clothing at the cleaners, and finishing not only one set of books for the Internal Revenue, but being thorough by nature, a second set as well. I was having a congratulatory drink when I heard Homes's

footsteps on the stairs, and a moment later he appeared, but without the Inspector. Still, there was a look of satisfaction on his face.

"Homes!" I said. "You have solved the case! Here, let me pour you a drink. Where is the Inspector?"

Homes accepted my proffered drink with a brief nod of thanks, settled himself in his favorite chair, quaffed deeply, and set the glass aside, reaching for his Maiskolben, a gift from a grateful King of Prussia for his help in the matter of Irene Addled.

"We are to meet the Inspector later this evening," said he, puffing smoke. "The man we seek works at night, and we shall confront him with proof of his black deed when he appears. As I so accurately surmised, he is a large fellow, so in addition to your bull's-eye lantern, Watney, I suggest you bring your pistol, as well. If you care to join in the end of this affair, that is," he added with a faint smile.

"Of course, Homes!" I said instantly. "But—" I frowned. "In all truth I am unable to understand how you could possibly see light in a case whose only clue were those three letters. And two of them the same, which would seem to me to reduce the chances enormously!"

Homes glanced at the clock and nodded as he settled further into his chair.

"There is ample time before we must leave," said he. "Allow me to use some of that time to explain this case to you." He reached into a pocket of the overcoat and brought out the three small wooden tiles, placing them face up upon the table. "To begin with," he said, once the letters were arranged to his satisfaction, "it occurred to me at once that Mrs. Belles, in selecting these letters, was attempting to leave some clue as to the identity of her assailant, but did not have time to complete her task before she expired.

"Still, the woman had made a brave start, and it would not do for us to fail to heed the direction in which she pointed us. However, I could not think of any word beginning with a double B, and a quick glance at my dictionary verified that fact. There was, of course, the use of the double B to designate small pellets for a child's gun, but since Mrs. Belles was bludgeoned and not shot, and also because I could see no use for the letter O in that case, I abandoned this line of thinking at once.

"So there I was with the letters BBO and making no progress until it occurred to me that possibly the clue lay, not in the letters in the order of B, B, and O, but rather in the reverse order of O, B, B."

He applied a match to his pipe which had gone out during his discourse, and puffed it back to life while I waited breathlessly for the continuation of his sensational ratiocination. When the Mais-kolben was once again burning to his satisfaction, Homes went on.

"Once I considered the letters in this sequence, I had taken a huge step towards solving the problem. What had Mrs. Belles been trying to spell when she selected those particular letters? The first thought that came to mind was the word ROBBER which contains the selected letters in the proper order; but then I considered that the word ROBBER contains six letters, and I did not think a dying woman would have picked a longer word when a shorter word, the word THIEF would have conveyed the same meaning. Therefore, Mrs. Belles was not attempting to spell the word ROBBER.

"Still, there was no doubt she was seeking as short a word as possible to give us some hint as to her assailant. I then carried my analysis a bit further. Since I could think of no word that *ends* with a double letter B any more than any word that begins with them, there had to be another letter Mrs. Belles would have selected to follow, had the poor woman had the time. And the letter that could follow a double B with the greatest of logic is simply the letter Y!"

"Wonderful, Homes!" I said, making no attempt to hide my profound admiration for his masterful analysis. Then I frowned. "But what does OBBY mean, Homes?"

"I am not through," he said a bit testily, and continued. "Obviously, Mrs. Belles was seeking the shortest word for her message, and there are only three likely words in English that have a single letter before the combination of O, B, B, Y. Those words are: Bobby, Lobby, and Hobby. I hated to think that a London bobby might be involved in a crime this despicable, but I had to admit it was a possibility. Lobby suggested a doorman. Since both doorman and a bobby would be large men with flat feet, with red cheeks from being out of doors a good bit of the time, and since both wear ornate uniforms and are both addicted to whistle blowing, one in pursuit of evil-doers, the other in seeking cabbies for tenants, I felt safe in describing the assailant as I did."

"But what about Hobby, Homes?" I inquired.

Homes looked at me with disdain. "Two out of three isn't bad," he said, and glanced at the mantel clock once again. "In any event," he went on, "a trip to the scene of the crime settled everything, as I was sure it would. I spoke with Mr. Belles, the victim's husband, and he was quick to agree that the assailant was undoubtedly the

doorman. It seems that Mr. Belles has small use for the doorman, who, it appears, in addition to constantly bragging he was once in the circus as a contortionist, prefers to stay in his cubicle and drink tea on rainy nights, rather than offer service to the tenants."

Homes came to his feet, adjusted his safety pins, and put aside his pipe. "Subterranean Towers operates on a rather odd basis," he went on. "For reasons of economy there is no doorman on duty during the day, but only at night when the security of the building is felt to be more greatly threatened. For this reason the man we seek will appear at work at nine o'clock, and we shall be meeting Inspector Lestoil at nine thirty on the nearest corner, prepared to make the arrest."

"But, Shostakovich!" I cried.

"Bless you," Homes said absently, and repaired to the sideboard where Mrs. Essex had put out a cold meal of curried chives and herring omelet. He slipped several of each into the cavernous pocket of his coat and moved to the stairway. "The lantern and your pistol, Watney," said he remindingly, and started down the steps.

Inspector Lestoil was waiting for us under the gas-lamp on the street corner closest the building; once we had seen to our weapons we advanced upon the building, ready to take the murderous doorman into custody. But to our surprise the lobby appeared to be deserted. The door to the cubicle where the doorman was accustomed to take his tea stood ajar, and the interior was empty.

Inspector Lestoil removed his bowler and scratched his head. "I cannot understand it," said he in a puzzled tone. "I saw the man enter this lobby a good half hour ago, yet he is nowhere in evidence at the moment!" He shrugged. "Possibly he is on an errand for one of the tenants."

"Possibly," Homes agreed, and leaned against the wall, prepared to wait, and to spend the time as he often did in mentally solving some problem or other. But I was more restless, and opened the door leading below, propping it open against my return. I raised my bull's-eye lantern and went down the steps. Once there, I called out.

"I say, Homes—"

"Later, Watney," said Homes in his usual insufferable tone.

"No, really, Homes—"

"I said later, Watney!"

"But quite seriously, Homes—"

My friend appeared in the door opening, glowering down at me.

"Really, Watney! A few moments of silence given over to contemplation would do you no harm, you know!"

"Oh, I agree, I agree!" I said hastily. "Couldn't really do anyone any harm, I suppose. But, still—"

Homes sighed, a martyr's sigh. "All right, Watney. What is it?"

"I just wished to inquire—this doorman, did he have a sort of a reddish uniform with buff piping?"

"I'm sure I have no idea. Why?"

"Well," I said apologetically, "there is this rather largish man with a reddish sort of uniform, with this buff—or possibly ecru—piping, and his head is in the gas furnace with the gas on. But no fire," I added, wishing to be accurate. I reached over and felt for the pulse; there was none. "He has no pulse," I added.

Homes sighed and came down the steps followed by Inspector Lestoil. The three of us managed to pull the man out and place his body on the floor. Homes contemplated the man with bitterness.

"So he cheated the hangman by committing suicide!" he said half-angrily.

"He has also been bludgeoned, Homes," I pointed out.

"No great trick for a man who was a circus contortionist," Homes said, and gave me a look that put my puerile comment in its place. He turned to Inspector Lestoil. "Well, Inspector, there's your case!"

"Thanks to you, Mr. Homes, only thanks to you!" said Inspector Lestoil with shining eyes, and gripped my friend's hand firmly in profound gratitude.

It was late the following morning when Homes put in his appearance at the breakfast table. By the time he had unfolded his serviette and had reached for his first buttered clove, I had almost finished perusing the morning journal.

"Well, Watney," said Homes with a faint smile, "from the look of dejection on your face I gather there are no interesting cases to be gleaned from the morning paper?"

"I'm afraid not, Homes," I said with a sigh, and then noticed a small article. "This has nothing to do with crime, I'm afraid, Homes, but it does mention a familiar name."

"Oh?" Homes said and waited for me to continue.

"Yes," I said. "It seems that Mr. Robert Belles is engaged to be married again, this time to the rich widow of a financier. She is quite a bit older than he is, but Mr. Belles claims it is true love."

"There are people like that, who are so enamoured of the married

state that even a few hours or days away from it are too much," Homes said philosophically. "Fortunately, I am not one of them." He thought for a moment. "Still, after the help Mr. Belles gave me in pinning the murder of his wife on the doorman, the least I can do is to congratulate him. A letter to Mr. Belles, if you please, Watney, and let us not make it impersonal. Address him 'My dear Bob . . .'"

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

HOMES, SWEET HOMES

Dedicated to Robert L. Fish

by JEANETTE WEISS

On Bagel Street resides Schlock Homes,
A most unusual sleuth.
Despite his diligence and care
He can't discern the truth.

A quite endearing man is he,
But certainly no ace.
In all the years he's plied his craft
He's never solved a case.

His flights of fancy are so wild
They seem controlled by magic.
His syllogisms fall apart,
His logic is most tragic.

Poor Homes, no matter what the crime
Or who the guilty party,
Your addled brain rejects the facts
And blames Professor Marty!

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a **NEW** short story by

HENRY T. PARRY

The baseball field in Slateton abutted the town icehouse—in fact, part of the icehouse was actually on the ballfield. Which was an important factor in the mystery—the disappearance of Slateton's leading citizen, Mayor Dal Bolger. Here are the facts in the case as seen through the eyes of a young teenager who happens to be the nephew of Slateton's Chief of Police . . .

THE TURNING POINT

by **HENRY T. PARRY**

I was in Charley McCall's news store trying to sneak a look at the new *Boy's Life* and maybe even read a little before Charley would notice me and say, like he always did, "Beat it, Hugh. How many times I got to tell you I don't want thirteen-fourteen-year-old kids hangin' around?" But Charley didn't say anything to me just then because he was too busy talking about how Dal Bolger had flown the coop.

"They better ask around and see if anybody's wife is missin'," Charley was saying to Ab Davis. "Outside of makin' money, Dal ain't got but one hobby."

"Well, Tommy Jennings says he's been in touch with the sheriff and the state police, but they don't know nothin'. There's no law says a man can't pick up and leave if he's a mind to, not so far's I know."

"But it don't make sense, Ab. Look, not only is Dal the mayor of this town, but he's makin' a pot of money, specially now that he's opened his second fillin' station out on the new state road. Let alone the ice business. Plus some other things he's got goin' we both know about. And there ain't nothin', not even—no, there ain't nothin'—Dal

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Bolger likes better than money. I heard too—I can't tell you who told me—that he didn't take nothin' out of the bank. And Eddy Swift down at the station says Dal didn't buy a ticket for anywhere."

"Well, Dal just bought that new Hupmobile. What's to stop a man from just gettin' in and go joy-ridin' up the road and never come back?"

"Yeah, and that new Hupmobile is standin' right this minute in Dal's barn out there on Second Street. And what's more, he never come in for the box of El Splendidos I ordered special for him."

"What about Edna? Mrs. Dal? What does she say?"

"Well, she's goin' around mighty solemn, but my wife saw her at the strawberry festival the other night and says it looks like she's been able to bear up under her grief pretty well."

"It takes all kinds, don't it? I remember when she first come to town. Prettiest thing you ever saw. Now look at her. Sour as a cookin' apple."

"Ab, you lived with Dal Bolger twenty, twenty-five years, you'd look worse than you do now, if that's possible."

"How'd a man like that ever get to be mayor anyway, Charley?"

"Because nobody else wanted the job. Besides, Dal figured it would help him in his business. Maybe it has. Like when he goes to the convention of fillin'-station proprietors where he can brag around some and maybe get called Mr. Mayor."

"My Ruth says she heard that Edna Bolger has filed for divorce. Ruth heard it from old Mrs. Hayes whose niece, Ella, works in the courthouse down in Weston."

"Now how can she do that? Dal ain't deserted her, has he? He ain't been missin' but about a week."

"He don't have to be missin' fifteen minutes. A body's got a right to apply whenever they want."

"But after puttin' up with Dal all these years, what's her hurry?"

"I don't know, Charley, unless she thinks Dal ain't coming back."

"Hey, Hugh"—Charley was talking to me—"put that magazine back. Who's goin' to want to buy it if you been holdin' it in your hand while you're eatin' a chocolate bar?"

I felt funny, standing there listening to them talking about Mayor Dal Bolger, and at the same time I was plenty scared. Because I knew that Dal Bolger was never coming back.

There aren't too many level places in our town, in Slateton, so the Big Field—that's the town baseball field—is in a funny place.

Keller's Dam backs up Indian Creek and holds water that the flour mill and the foundry use. In winter they cut ice there and store it in the old icehouse that stands at the edge of the water. The ballfield is squeezed in between the icehouse and a long ridge that the railroad tracks ran across halfway up. To watch the game folks just stood or sat on the grass at the bottom of the hill because there weren't any seats.

The playing field is so close to the icehouse that the left-field foul line is painted across the roof of the icehouse. Every so often, when the big team is playing, some player would connect with a long one and it would sail foul over the icehouse roof and plop into the dam and in about two seconds there's maybe a dozen kids swimming out to get that ball, a regular two-and-a-half-dollar one, that they got to keep. Sometimes the ball would land on the icehouse roof and roll into one of the holes and drop inside the icehouse where you'd never see it again because no kids were allowed in there ever since a block of ice slipped and broke Bushel Farley's leg. Us kids used the ballfield on weekdays, and on Saturday afternoons we'd be there watching the big team.

How I knew about Dal Bolger was like this: us kids—the Brown Hill Champs—were playing the Slateton Junior Tigers and the game broke up in an argument and they took the ball and went home. It was a hot afternoon, so when I saw Ricky Pritchard, who drives the ice truck, loading up for the last delivery of the day, I thought maybe I could sneak a piece of ice. I hung around the loading platform and after Ricky had pulled away, I noticed he hadn't snapped the padlock that locks the sliding door into the icehouse. I went inside and closed the door except for a couple of inches, putting my Louisville Slugger down so somebody couldn't slide the door shut and trap me inside.

Inside was scary. No windows, with the only light coming in through the holes in the roof where the sun shone in separate slants. The ice was stacked up like big cartons, with tall posts and cross-timbers every so often to keep it in place. Overhead was a chain hoist, the kind that moved from side to side and from front to back as well as up and down—they used it to move blocks of ice up to the loading platform. There was a long wide passage running to the back of the building between walls of ice that were piled up maybe 25 or 30 feet high. Every 20 feet or so along this open space, a ladder was nailed to a post so they could get up to the top of the ice to move it.

When I saw the ladders, I knew that here was my chance to pick

up a two-and-a-half because I knew for sure that three or four balls had already landed on the icehouse roof this season and rolled through the holes. They would just have to be lying up there in the sawdust on the top layer of ice.

I climbed a ladder on the ballfield side and the first thing I saw lying on the sawdust in the center of a patch of sunlight was a two-and-a-half, a perfect, brand-new baseball, with just a kind of a green smudge where it had skidded on the outfield grass. I was so excited I grabbed it and was about to climb down again when I thought I better look under all the other holes on this side. So I began to work my way over the sawdust-packed ice toward the front of the icehouse.

Twice I almost fell into cracks between the blocks of ice where they teetered when I stepped on them. The icehouse had a cool, sweet, piney smell—from the sawdust, I guess—but now I noticed there was another smell. I must have been smelling it for a little time before it came to the front of my mind that this new smell wasn't right for here. This smell was out of place and maybe dangerous, the way they say you can smell a copperhead or a rattler even when you can't see them.

What I smelled was cigar smoke. I heard the voices of two men quarreling. I picked my way over the sawdust to the front and looked down over the edge and saw Dal Bolger and One Arm Dave standing just inside the door which they had slid shut.

Now nobody liked Dal Bolger as far as I knew, but everybody hated One Arm Dave. Us kids were all afraid of him and so were a lot of grown-up men because One Arm could swing that half arm of his like a club. They say he knocked out Perky Owens once after they got into a quarrel at the Hampton County Democratic Club. One Arm had a brother and two sisters living in town but they were ashamed of him and wouldn't have anything to do with him. He lived in a furnished room over Bumpus McKinney's poolroom and ate in Dutch Werner's diner which folks said should have killed him.

I once heard Tommy Jennings say—he's my uncle and he's the Chief of Police (we only got three policemen)—that One Arm was jail bait, but outside of getting locked up overnight for being drunk and fighting, he had never been caught doing anything that would send him to jail. He was the kind of person who made everybody feel easier when he left town which he did every so often. He used to tell anybody new in town that he had lost his arm in the war but everybody knew that it was cut off by a boxcar wheel when One

Arm misjudged the distance while trying to hop a D. & H. freight. Everybody knew what made him miss, too. He was drunk as a skunk. When he worked it was at jobs like unloading lumber for the Slate-ton Lumber Company, but lately he hadn't been working at anything and folks wondered how he got along. I was about to find out.

Dal Bolger took the cigar out of his mouth and stamped on it.

"I know how many cases were in your last run. I know what Ricky Pritchard's delivered on the ice route. So that means I know how many cases should be here. Look."

He went to one of the storage spaces and pulled aside a tarpaulin. A wire fence with a little gate in it was stretched across the opening, and behind it, instead of sawdust-covered ice, there were stacks of cardboard boxes.

"Right now there should be sixty-three cases here. But there's only forty-three. Same thing with the last shipment you and Mike ran. When I pay you, it's all here. Then some of it disappears."

Dal Bolger was shouting and his face was red and he kind of stuck his head forward like he was going to butt somebody. One Arm stood a head shorter than Dal, with wide shoulders and a thick neck, hunched down, with his arms held out as if he was ready to wrap them around something and lift it. His mouth was loose and he had twisted his lips, smiling and kind of daring Dal to do something. I could understand why everybody was afraid of him because with his yellowish meaty face One Arm looked just as mean and bad as they said he was. The two men no longer looked like the people you would see on the streets, but more like some ancient cavemen snarling at each other.

"Whyn't you go and tell Tommy Jennings or the sheriff that One Arm Dave is stealing the booze that you're bootlegging," One Arm said. "Bootlegging is a crime, Dal, you know that. Maybe you and me could stand trial together down at Weston. Maybe even get to share the same cell."

"You talk smart, One Arm, but—"

"Maybe I'm the one who should squeal. This is your ice business, ain't it, Dal? All I got to do is tell somebody what you got stashed out here."

"Who's going to believe you? The town drunk."

One Arm looked like he was enjoying what he was doing, like it was a change in places, with him having the upper hand, the town bum making the town mayor say uncle.

"Or is it a Federal crime, Dal? Selling booze with no revenue

stamps, something like that. Maybe you'd like Lewisburg better than the county jail. Higher types, I hear."

Dal looked quickly around like he was searching for something to hit One Arm with but One Arm didn't seem to notice because he went on, this time in a more businesslike tone of voice.

"From now on, Dal, twenty cases out of every run. That's going to be my cut. Plus expenses. That's cheap. And, of course, a bottle now and then for myself."

Dal made a quick swoop and came up with my Louisville Slugger in his hand. He came toward One Arm, his left arm stretched out and his finger pointing, his right hand holding the bat as high as his head. His lips moved but no words came out.

"We'll see who gets a cut, you"—he finally managed to get out, and called him a pretty bad name.

One Arm backed away real slow, not like he was afraid but like he was used to fights like this and was just watching for a chance. He backed up until he was against the big table that Ricky Pritchard used to chop up the ice into 25- and 50-cent pieces. He reached behind him and picked up an icepick. When Dal swung the bat, One Arm took the blow on what was left of his forearm and swung low and upward with the icepick. Then again and again and again.

Dal stood there, raising the bat in three jerky motions until it was straight up over his shoulder. His fingers let go and the bat fell but his arm was still raised over his head. Then he dropped, not frontwards or backwards, but kind of straight down as if he had suddenly melted.

One Arm looked at the pulley block of the chain hoist that was hanging over the chopping table. He pulled on the chain loop that moved it front or back until he got it right over Dal. He pulled on the other chain loop that raised or lowered the pulley block and brought the block right down over Dal's middle. He slid the hook that was fastened under the pulley block under Dal's belt and began hauling away on the chain loop.

Dal's body began to go up, but very slowly because you got to pull a lot of times on the chain before the load rises very far. One Arm kept hauling away until he had raised the body above the level of the stacked ice. When he stopped, the body swung back and forth, 25 feet up, in the open space of the passageway. It reminded me of the sides of beef in Butch Corman's cold-storage room.

I was scared before because of what I had seen, but now I felt as stiff as if all this ice had frozen me. Because I saw One Arm was

going to hide Dal's body somewhere up here on top of the ice. If he pulled down on the right-hand loop of the chain that moved the hoist sideways, Dal's body would be moved to the stacked ice on the other side of the passageway. If he pulled the left-hand side of the loop, the body would move across to the side where I was hiding.

I put my face down in the wet sawdust and tried to squinch myself up small. I could hear the rasp of the chain through the hoist mechanism, and it seemed to go on for a thousand years, rattling and rattling. Finally I forced myself to raise my head to see which way it would move. It was moving away, toward the other side.

When he had moved it pretty far back in from the passageway, One Arm climbed up and went across the packed sawdust to where Dal's body was hanging and twirling in a slow circle. I was lucky because it was dim on my side—no holes in the roof near me—but One Arm and Dal were in a shaft of light, so I could see clearly what One Arm was doing. He yanked Dal's belt buckle loose and let the body fall into a space between the blocks of ice. He filled the space with sawdust until it was level with the top of the ice. When he was scraping the sawdust, I saw him pick up a baseball and toss it into the space with the body without even looking at it.

After One Arm had climbed down and jockeyed the chain hoist back to where he had found it, he looked around to be sure he hadn't left anything behind. He picked up my bat and stared at it. Then he took a key from his pocket and went to the section with the wire gate where the whiskey was. After fussing with the padlock, he finally got it open, went in, and came out with a bottle stuck in his pocket. He locked the gate, pulled the tarpaulin over it, picked up my bat, and left. I was afraid he was going to padlock the sliding door of the icehouse but he didn't, leaving it open a few inches.

I waited for what seemed like a year to be sure One Arm had gone. Then I went over the ice to the edge and climbed down. I was going straight to my Uncle Tommy Jennings, the chief of police, and tell him what had happened so he could arrest One Arm. I pushed the sliding door close behind me.

"Don't forget your bat, kid."

One Arm Dave stood there on the platform, holding out my Louisville Slugger.

I automatically reached for it and One Arm grabbed a bunch of my shirt front and yanked me up close. His breath smelled like rotten apples and there were broken veins in his nose and even in his eyes.

"What did you see? Come on," he shook me, "what did you see?"

I was so scared that I wasn't smart enough to say that I hadn't seen a thing. "I saw you stick Dal Bolger with an icepick."

He pulled me even closer and then slammed me back against the icehouse wall. Then he came over and pinned me against the wall with that one hand around my throat. Even though he was real mad, I could see that he was thinking fast.

"I'll never tell, One Arm. Honest. I'll never tell anyone. Let me go."

"That's right. You'll never tell, and I'll tell you why. You got a little brother and sister, ain't you? What's their names?"

"Tim." I could hardly say the name I was so scared. And after I said it, I was ashamed because I could guess what was coming.

"Your little sister. What's her name?"

"Angie." Oh, nobody, I thought, nobody would be bad enough to hurt Tim and Angie. Not Tim and Angie. Or would they?

"Some night, maybe when Tim and Angie are out playing after supper, just before dark, just before they're supposed to come in for bed, they'll just disappear."

He pressed me harder against the wall.

"Remember, I got friends, kid. Out-of-town friends. And that night I'll be standing in the bar of the Country Club where everybody can see me. So keep your mouth shut."

He pulled his hand away and went off, across left field toward North Main Street and downtown. I'm kind of ashamed to tell it, but I sat down on the platform and cried. I cried for a long time, but at last I got up and started for home and for Dad and Mom and Tim and Angie. I would keep my mouth shut all right.

Nothing happened for about two weeks. People were even beginning to talk about something other than where Dal Bolger might be. I caught Mom looking at me over the supper table, sharp and worried. Finally she took me to Doc Simmons and told him there was something wrong with me. Doc examined me and said he couldn't find anything and said I should get some fresh air and exercise and wholesome food—Mom sniffed—and gave me some pink pills from that big jar he's got.

One afternoon I bumped into One Arm in front of Jones's Pharmacy and he gave me a horrible smile, kind of like he wanted to be friendly and do me a favor or something. Maybe he was ashamed of what he was doing but it wasn't likely. Or maybe it was kind of

like trying to balance off the bad things he might have to have done to Tim and Angie.

"Come on, kid, I'll buy you an ice-cream soda."

The idea of eating an ice-cream soda that One Arm bought made me sick at my stomach, but I was afraid to refuse. We went inside and I told Olly Parks I would have chocolate. When Olly asked One Arm what he would have, Olly said the words like he hoped One Arm would refuse, and he did. Olly slapped my soda together and slid it through the counter puddles in front of me and then went to the back of the store. I took a couple of pulls through the straw and it tasted like mud. I pushed the glass away and got up to go.

"Wait a minute," One Arm said. "I didn't hear them glooping noises like when there ain't anything left under the straw. Maybe you don't like my sodas, kid? It looks like you don't want you and me to be friends."

"I don't feel so good."

"You ain't said anything. That's good. See you keep it that way." His voice was low and mean. His tone changed and he said, "You wouldn't tell on Ol' Dave, now would you?" And then like he couldn't make up his mind, he switched again. "You know what will happen if you do."

One Arm had made me awful afraid, but now when he tried to be friendly, he made me sick. I walked out of the pharmacy and once I got to the street I started to run. I headed up North Main toward the dam and the ballfield, all the while worrying about what I was going to do. At the dam I tried skipping flat stones across but I wasn't able to count how many skips before a stone sank because I couldn't put my mind to anything but the terrible thing I knew. There stood the icehouse with Dal Bolger dead inside, and here I was, throwing rocks into the water, doing nothing about it.

I thought how I had gotten into this pickle because I was afraid of what One Arm or his friends might do to Tim and Angie. I was afraid to refuse the ice-cream soda he offered me. I was afraid of meeting him on the street. And I was afraid I would talk in my sleep or somehow give away the secret. Everything was because I was afraid. I threw my last stone straight down into the water as hard as I could and right then and there I made up my mind that I was through being afraid. I was going to kill One Arm Dave.

It scares you when you find out how easy it is to kill somebody once you set your mind on it. I looked around for a big stone. They were pretty easy to find in our town because Dad told me that about

12,000 years ago the glacier ice had melted right here and dropped about a zillion stones. I found one, about 15 pounds maybe, and I lugged it into the icehouse where I put it in a cardboard box, tied some rope around the box, and used the chain hoist to raise it to the top of the ice.

I climbed up, took the stone out of the box, and set it on a cross-timber that was even with the surface of the ice, right over the wire gate to the whiskey space. I plastered the stone with wet sawdust so it wouldn't stand out. I knew One Arm would be visiting the whiskey hiding place pretty regular, and all I had to do was to wait up here on the ice and sawdust until One Arm stood below, unlocking the padlock. Then I would drop the stone 25 feet on his head.

I went to the icehouse every afternoon—One Arm never got up until noon—and waited there until just before Ricky Pritchard came back to lock up after his last delivery. It was plenty scary in there, knowing that 40 feet away Dal Bolger's body was lying under the ice. And it was quiet and would have been even more spooky except I could hear the kids playing ball. I wondered how come I was lying up here in the wet sawdust waiting to kill a man instead of getting my licks at bat with the Brown Hill Champs. But I was bound and determined I was going to do it. Nobody in this world would ever hurt Tim and Angie. And I wasn't ever going to be afraid again.

Finally, one Saturday afternoon I was waiting up there on the ice, right above the whiskey compartment. The Slateton big team was playing the Pennsburg All Stars. I could hear the clean sharp crack of the bat and I could tell from the cheers that the big team was ahead. I don't know why One Arm would choose such a time to come to the icehouse to pick up a bottle, with maybe a hundred people standing around watching the game. But he did. I heard the icehouse door slide open. I sneaked to the edge and looked down to see One Arm fumbling with the padlock on the wire gate. I stood up on the cross-timber and picked up the stone, tight against my stomach, 25 feet over One Arm's head. I had a dead aim on the top of One Arm's dirty Panama hat. Just as I let go, I heard a yell.

"Hold it, Hugh! Hold it!"

One Arm spun around, just enough for the stone to miss him. My Uncle Tommy and two men who looked like they were policemen ran out of an empty storage space. These two had little black guns that they poked right into One Arm's stomach.

"All right, One Arm," Uncle Tommy said. "You're under arrest. We got it out of Ricky Pritchard, the ice and whiskey delivery man.

These men are Federal and they made a buy."

One of the Federal men slipped a handcuff over One Arm's wrist and locked the other cuff over his own wrist.

"Uncle Tommy," I said after I had climbed down, and from the pure hate in One Arm's face he knew what I was going to say. "Dal Bolger's up there, on that side, under the ice. One Arm stuck him with an icepick."

Uncle Tommy went up the ladder fast and pretty soon we could hear him swearing. He came to the edge and looked down, his hands and clothes covered with wet sawdust.

"He's there all right. Wait till I climb down, and you, Jim, you go downtown and tell Doc Simmons to come on out here. He's the coroner."

"How'd you know this, Hugh?" Uncle Tommy asked when he was down again.

I told them what I had seen One Arm do and about how he would do something bad to Tim and Angie if I told. When I said this, the out-of-town detective who had One Arm handcuffed to his wrist, kind of twisted the chain, without ever looking at One Arm.

"Maybe you better get on home now, Hugh," Uncle Tommy said. "We got things to do here. I'll talk to you later."

Nobody said anything about the big stone that was lying there at our feet.

I went out on the loading platform and looked at the ballfield where we played all summer and at the dam where we swam, and I knew they were never going to be the same for me. Summer was over, and school would start in another week. All the bad things that had happened to me because of One Arm Dave and Dal Bolger, they were things I couldn't help, things I never wanted to happen, but they had, and I fought back. What worried me was what fighting back had showed me about myself. I had meant to kill One Arm Dave. Now I was as bad as they were.

"Q"

a **NEW** short story by

DICK STODGHILL

We welcome Dick Stodghill's first appearance in EQMM. Mr. Stodghill's story is the kind that used to be called "a heartrending drama of human retribution." But old-fashioned phrase or not, it fits, and you will find a compassionate spot in your heart for the old man and his search for peace . . .

A DEBT TO BE PAID

by **DICK STODGHILL**

The old man awoke with a start. He peered around the veranda, his eyes blinking rapidly as they skipped from one empty chair to another. Satisfied he was alone, that he had not been observed by any of his cronies, he sighed with relief.

He struggled to his feet, using both hands and arms to hoist himself out of a wicker chair. Once up, he remained still a moment, giving his blood a chance to start circulating through his shaky legs. When the tingling eased he reached out to the long wooden railing and used it for support until he got to the stairs.

He walked down them, across a wide lawn and past a barn with COUNTY HOME lettered on its cupola. He continued on to a small woods cut in half by a brook flowing along a rocky bed.

He stopped when he reached his favorite hideaway, a huge gray boulder close beside the stream. Its smooth surface was imbedded with small pebbles and he traced a pattern from one to another of them with a bony forefinger. After a few seconds he eased around the side of the boulder and faced the water, coming to the small ledge that was his usual seat. Once settled, he bent and picked up a loose pebble, tossed it in the brook, and wondered what he was going to do about the dream.

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He had easily coped with it when it interrupted his sleep only three or four times a year. Then it began bothering him more and more often. Once a month, twice a month, every week until finally now it had become a nightly occurrence. It had invaded his afternoon nap for the first time a week earlier. Twice he awoke with a cry to find the others on the veranda staring at him. Had he been talking in his sleep?

The dream started to take shape in his mind just as it did in his sleep. A swirling white mist and then suddenly a starkly vivid picture. He angrily pushed it aside. Bad enough seeing it in his sleep without letting it take over his waking hours. But after a minute or two it crept back again and this time caught hold. He sat glassy-eyed as it unfolded . . .

The train was creeping into a dark freight yard as he dropped to the ground from an open boxcar door. A light rain, hardly more than a vapor in the air, dampened his face. He turned up the collar of his red-and-black plaid jacket in a futile attempt to ward off the intermittent gusts of cold wind from the west. He didn't know where he was and didn't care. The important thing was the railroad bulls were preparing to sweep the train and it was time to find shelter elsewhere.

He had jumped from the south side of the train, so he headed south. Cautiously he picked his way across half a dozen tracks to a street that ended at a guard rail where two large warehouses faced each other. He considered each of the buildings as a place of refuge but rejected them in turn. Watchmen with clubs would surely be inside.

He walked on, coming next to a long row of ramshackle houses. In the following block, the houses began to show improvement and after two more blocks he was in a neighborhood of well-maintained bungalows. Most had garages, so maybe he'd be lucky and find one with an unlocked door. The third knob he tried was unlocked.

He slipped inside, softly closed the door behind him, and stood quietly in the blackness. He reached out a tentative hand, touched a car, a sedan. It also was unlocked, so he opened a rear door and silently climbed inside.

The seat was soft. Not wide enough to stretch out full length but a lot more comfortable than his usual bed, the ground or the floor of a boxcar. Best of all, the car was warm and dry.

He reached in a jacket pocket and pulled out half a sandwich wrapped in wax paper. He chewed slowly, savoring every bite, mak-

ing it last as long as possible. When the final crumb was gone he rooted around in another pocket until his fingers closed on the butt of a cigar. He put it in his mouth, withdrew a flattened box of matches from the same pocket, struck one, and drew on the dry cigar. When it was burning he relaxed on the soft seat, exhaled the smoke, and sighed contentedly.

It was October, time to think about heading south. Maybe find a job somewhere. Conditions were improving, or so they were saying around the hobo jungles. He had seen little sign of it himself but it would be nice if it were true. Life on the road seemed harder at 32 than it had even a year earlier. Yes, it would be nice if he could find a job, rent a room of his own, eat regularly . . . The cigar went out and slipped from his fingers as he fell asleep.

The florid face was only a foot from his own. Bulging eyes, bulbous nose, thick lips spread wide as angry words poured from the man's mouth. For an instant he was bewildered, disoriented, but then he sprang from the seat and out the door on the other side of the car.

The man continued to berate him. "You no-good bum! You dirty, rotten bum, I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget!"

Too late he moved toward the open double doors. The man had grabbed a heavy spade, cut off his retreat, and was advancing menacingly. As the spade descended toward his head he made a desperate lunge for the handle, wrenched it free, and kicked at his assailant's groin.

The man gasped and sank to the floor. Instinctively he raised the spade and struck. Again and again he lifted it and brought it down. At last he stopped, recoiling in horror from the bloody heap on the floor. He dropped the spade, looked around wild-eyed, and ran out into the gray light of early morning.

Once outside he hesitated, caught sight of a woman's face watching him from a window of the house, and fled down the driveway. Again he halted uncertainly when he reached the sidewalk. A man stared at him in surprise from a porch across the street, so he began running. North this time, back toward the railroad tracks.

The run was like miles instead of blocks. When at last he arrived at the warehouses he slipped out of his blood-spattered jacket and tossed it under a loading platform. He hated to part with it—he would miss its warmth and protection; but it was too distinctive, too easy to spot.

He resumed his run but after crossing several tracks he slowed to a walk and struck out east. He was nearing a dense patch of tall

weeds when he heard the first siren. He recrossed the tracks, stumbled over the last rail, and fell headlong into the tall protective weeds.

The wailing of the sirens seemed interminable. He lay shivering among the weeds and knew it was not from the cold alone. At last he heard a train and carefully parted the foliage. An eastbound freight was moving through the yards, slowly gaining speed. He ran for it, climbed aboard an open gondola, and dropped down among pieces of tarpaulin-covered machinery.

He jumped from the train when it slowed just west of Cleveland, hid in a woods until darkness fell, then stumbled wearily along the tracks to a hobo camp. An old man offered him the remains of a stew and after gulping it down he slept fitfully, cold, lonely, afraid. In the morning he realized he didn't know where the nightmare had taken place. A good-sized town somewhere east of Indianapolis, but it wasn't important. He was on the run and what did it matter where the pursuers had taken up the chase?

The dream faded and the old man slowly focused on the present. Damn the dream, he thought. It was becoming an obsession. Why? Why now, after 42 years? If only it really were a dream, but of course it wasn't.

He rummaged through his pockets until he found a battered old pipe bound together at the stem and shank with friction tape. From a roll-up pouch he tamped crumbling flakes of stale tobacco into the bowl, struck a match, and puffed until it was burning well. He watched the smoke curl skyward and meditated. If he walked away from the County Home he wouldn't be able to return. Others had done so and found themselves at the end of a long list waiting for admission.

He had to do it though, he had known that for days now. Conscience, that must be it. A feeling after all this time that he had to clear the record before it was too late. There would be no worry about getting back into the County Home—he would have a new home behind high walls. At least he would be able to sleep again and that made all other considerations unimportant.

He'd leave in the morning. There was money the authorities didn't know about, concealed long ago near the gray boulder and added to from time to time. Not a lot but enough for a bus ticket west, food, and a few nights in cheap hotels.

After breakfast he gathered his meager possessions, slipped out

a side door, and walked to the highway. He raised his thumb and the fourth car pulled over.

The public library in town was his first stop. A librarian directed him to a large atlas showing railroad lines. With a gnarled finger he followed the old New York Central mainline east from Indianapolis. Anderson was the first possibility, then Midland. Winchester was too small. So were Union City, Sidney, and Bellefontaine. Marion, Ohio? Big enough but too far east. No, it had to have been Anderson or Midland.

Shortly after noon he boarded a Trailways bus. The ride was long and tiring, so he kept reminding himself how much more comfortable the seat was than the floor of an empty boxcar. Still, it would be nice to stretch out. He changed buses twice, arrived in Anderson the following morning, and went directly to the library.

The librarian placed the reel on the machine, showed him how to focus it and center the pages of the *Herald* on the screen. Laboriously he studied headline after headline, page after page. Hours later, eyes burning, he switched off the machine. The librarian came over, put the reel back in the small cardboard box labeled *October 1937*. He stood up, flexed his legs, and walked slowly to the door and outside into the nippy autumn air. No, it hadn't been Anderson.

He bummed a ride to the edge of town, hitched another on to Midland. Rickety stairs led him to a flophouse over a tavern near the tracks. When the dream jerked him awake hours before dawn it had been even more distinct, more intense than usual. Despite his weariness he was unable to sleep again.

A bowl of oatmeal and a cup of coffee in a greasy restaurant was his breakfast. When the library opened he was waiting on the wide steps outside, the grocery bag containing all his earthly possessions under his arm. He pored over microfilm again until noon, then stopped when his eyes could take no more. He had covered the pages of the *Midland News-Banner* from the first to the fifteenth of the month without finding what he was looking for.

The first nagging doubt entered his mind as he got up and wandered outside. What if he had made a mistake? Suppose it hadn't been the New York Central between Indianapolis and Cleveland? But it had been, he was certain of it. Still, the knot in the pit of his stomach grew steadily larger. What if he couldn't find it? His money was getting low. Where could he go, what could he do?

He ate a sandwich, drank another cup of coffee. He wanted to lie down and rest his burning eyes, but he forced his legs to climb the

steps of the library again. He had to find the place, he couldn't give in to the fatigue that engulfed his body.

It jumped out at him twenty minutes after he returned to his seat at the machine. Page one, October 17, 1937. *South Side Man Murdered, Transients Questioned.*

A 42-year-old Midland man, John J. Squires, was beaten to death early today in the garage at his home, 614 S. Dudley St. Police immediately began a roundup of transients.

The victim's wife, Anna, told police her husband went to the garage shortly before seven o'clock this morning. Several minutes later, not having heard the car start, she went to a rear window and saw a man run out of the garage.

Mrs. Squires went to the garage and found her husband lying beside the car. He had been badly beaten, apparently with the blade of a garden spade. Mrs. Squires called an ambulance and the police. Her husband was pronounced dead at the scene by Coroner Ralph T. Taylor.

Mrs. Squires said the running man appeared to be a transient. She told the police he was about 30 years old, 5-10, and 150 pounds. He was wearing a gray cap, black trousers, and a red-and-black plaid jacket.

A neighbor, Frank Edwards, 613 S. Dudley St., also saw the man run from the garage and then north on Dudley. He confirmed Mrs. Squires's description of the killer.

Police theorize the man sought shelter in the garage and was surprised by Mr. Squires. By noon more than a dozen men had been picked up and questioned at police headquarters.

Mr. Squires, an 18-year employee of Clay Brothers Co., also is survived by. . .

The old man leaned back in the wooden chair, sat quietly for a moment, then read the story again. When he reached the end he rewound the film, placed it in its box, and walked to the service desk.

The librarian looked up and smiled. "Finished?" she said.

The old man nodded his head. "Where's the jail?" he asked. The woman told him and he walked away.

He pressed the button beside the pair of heavy steel doors and looked around, puzzled, when a voice asked, "Can I help you?" Above and to the left of the doors he saw a small television camera. He looked at it and said, "I want to see the sheriff."

"What?" This time he realized the voice came from a square grat-

ing above the button, so he repeated, "I want to see the sheriff."

"He's up at the courthouse. Can I help you?"

The old man shook his head and turned away. He had passed the sprawling modern courthouse walking down from the library, so he retraced his steps and entered the white structure. He crossed the lobby to a directory, studied it a moment, then turned to the elevators. When he got off at the third floor he looked around uncertainly, finally saw a small black sign reading *Sheriff*, and shuffled toward it.

A woman seated at a desk behind a counter smiled and said, "Can I help you?" but he ignored her and walked to the open door of a small office at his right. A portly, ruddy-complexioned man in a brown uniform looked up from his desk.

"Hello," he said. "What can I do for you today?"

"You the sheriff?"

"You called it." The man stood up, walked around the desk, and extended his hand. "Joe McAuliffe. What's on your mind?"

"I killed a man."

The sheriff drew back a little and studied him from surprised eyes. "Better tell me about it, old-timer. Who'd you kill?"

"A man named Squires. John J. Squires."

"Where'd this happen?"

"At his house. 614 South Dudley Street. In the garage."

"It would be a city matter then, but I should of heard about it. Did you just come from there?"

The old man shook his head, so the sheriff said, "You're sure you killed him? How'd it happen?"

"I hit him with a shovel. It killed him all right."

"John J. Squires, you say?" The sheriff scratched his head, then shook it from side to side. "Funny, I don't remember it. When exactly did it happen?"

"October 17, 1937."

The sheriff dropped down in his chair, hard. He frowned a moment, then his face broke into a grin. "Are you putting me on, old man? That's better'n forty years ago."

"I know it. Want to get it off my chest."

A frown creased the sheriff's brow again. He studied his visitor intently for a minute before picking up the phone, dialing a number, and saying, "Detectives." After a pause he said, "That you, Charlie? Joe McAuliffe. Do me a favor, will you. See if you've got an open file on a John J. Squires." He spelled the last name, looking at the

old man for confirmation, and then, "A murder victim."

The sheriff drummed two fingers on his desk and continued to stare at his visitor while several minutes passed in silence. At last he said, "You don't? No, don't bother. Thanks, Charlie."

He cradled the phone, took two cigars from a shirt pocket, and held one out to the other man. "They don't have a file on it, Pop. Think maybe you made a mistake?"

"No mistake. Not by me, anyway."

The sheriff removed the cellophane wrapper from his cigar, rolled the tip of it around his lips, and struck a match. Through a haze of smoke he said, "I don't know what to tell you, old-timer. What do you want me to do?"

"Lock me up. I told you, I killed a man."

McAuliffe chuckled a little.

He picked up the phone again, dialed, and said, "This is the sheriff. Is Phil there?" A short delay and then, "Phil, I need some help. Can you come down to my office a minute?"

The two men sat without speaking until a dark-haired man of about 30 attired in an expensive suit entered the door. The sheriff stood up again and walked to the man, put a hand on his shoulder. Turning to the old man, McAuliffe said, "This is Philip Cosgrove, the county prosecutor," and then, to the other, "Phil, we've got a little problem. My friend here says he killed a man out on South Dudley back in 1937 but the city hasn't got a file on it."

The prosecutor laughed. "Did you say 1937?" He turned to the old man and said, "That's forty-two years ago and you're just getting around to reporting it?"

"Like I told the sheriff, I want to get it off my chest."

"Better explain it."

"I was on the bum. That was back in the Depression, you know. It was cold and I needed a place to sleep, so I hid in a garage. In the morning this man found me, came at me with a shovel, and I took it away from him and killed him with it. I hopped a freight a little while later and they never caught up with me."

The prosecutor looked at the sheriff. "You say there's no record of it?"

"No active file at the city. That's all I checked."

The prosecutor looked at his watch, glanced at the old man, and shrugged. "Okay, lock him up. It's too late to do much about it now but we'll check it out in the morning. No hurry, I guess, after forty-two years."

The old man leaned back in his chair and sighed. For the first time in days he smiled.

He was given a cell to himself. It was warm; the bunk suspended from a wall was comfortable and the evening meal was tasty, better than the ones served back at the County Home. After dinner he stretched out on the bunk, lit the cigar the sheriff had given him, and reviewed it all in his mind. He had made the right move, he was certain of it. Now he was content. After a time the cigar went dead and he slept soundly, untroubled by dreams.

Late the next morning a turnkey unlocked his cell and said, "The sheriff wants to see you." He led him out of the block and down a hallway to a small room.

Joe McAuliffe was leaning back in a chair, feet on a table, a cigar in his mouth. He took another from his pocket and held it out. The old man put it away to enjoy later. "Sit down, Pop," the sheriff said and grinned at him as a clock on the wall loudly ticked away seconds that extended into minutes. Finally he said, "What's the story, old-timer? Need a place out of the cold with winter coming on, is that it?" The old man stared at him, bewildered.

The sheriff swung his feet to the floor. "Why don't you try the mission down the street? They could put you up for a night or two. Don't you have relatives somewhere, kids or anything?"

The first tremor of fear shook the old man's body. Haltingly he said, "I don't get you, Sheriff."

"I hear you were checking the old newspapers down at the library before you came in to see me yesterday. It was a good try but you didn't read far enough."

His fear intensified. "I still don't get you."

"That murder took place, all right. Just like you said but they caught the guy the same day. If you'd read one more issue you'd've known that and saved us both a lot of trouble."

The room seemed hazy before the old man's eyes. He ran the back of a hand across them but it made things even less distinct.

"But—" he began, then he hesitated, groped for words. "But I did it, I told you that. What do you mean they caught the guy? They couldn't have."

"They did, old-timer. A fella named George Prescott. Caught him in the railroad yards about six blocks away. Two witnesses identified him." The sheriff flipped the pages of a file on his desk. "An Anna Squires, the victim's wife, and a Frank Edwards."

"But how could they? It was me."

"Positive identifications. Picked him out of a lineup."

McAuliffe took a paper from the folder and read, "George Prescott, twenty-seven, no known address. Five-eleven, one hundred seventy pounds. Brown hair, brown eyes. Wearing blue denims and a red-and-black plaid jacket."

The old man brought his fist down sharply on the table. "That was it, the jacket! I threw it away under a loading dock. I knew it would be too easy to spot. He must have found it."

The sheriff grinned at him. "Give it up, Pop. Everything you know about it could have come from the newspaper. The case was closed a long time ago."

"You're not saying they convicted this Prescott?"

McAuliffe nodded.

"But how could they? He was innocent!" The old man sat down, shaking his head, staring with haunted eyes at the tabletop. Suddenly he jerked his head up and said, "What about fingerprints? On the shovel or in the car."

The sheriff leafed through the papers. "Nothing in here. No mention of finding any at the scene. Prescott's are on file, of course."

"But there had to be prints! Can't you check?"

McAuliffe chuckled. "I have checked." He pointed to the file and said, "This is it. What do you expect after forty-two years?"

The old man slumped. "This Prescott, how long did he serve?"

"Six or seven months."

"That's all?" The old man's face brightened. "Thank God for that."

"Yep," the sheriff said. "He got the chair in May of thirty-eight."

A deputy was holding smelling salts under the old man's nose when he came to. The sheriff handed him a cup of coffee and said, "Drink this, you'll feel better."

When the cup was empty, McAuliffe gave him the bag containing his possessions and walked him to the double steel doors. "How you fixed for money?" the sheriff asked and when there was no reply, took a ten-dollar bill from his wallet and pressed it in the other's hand. He unlocked the door and gently nudged the old man outside.

He turned then and murmured, "I thought only one died but—" The door clanged shut behind him.

The old man remained standing there, confused, uncertain. After a time he slowly descended the stairs and shuffled away up the street. A misty rain had begun to fall. With fumbling fingers he turned up the collar of his jacket, but the cold October wind found its way inside. The frail old body trembled.

a **NEW** detective story by

JACK RITCHIE

At one point the detective-narrator says, "Mr. Hudson, you tell an interesting story." Interesting? Yes, indeed. But more than that—bizarre; and more than that—disturbing. After all, Mr. Hudson admitted he would close his eyes and search the universe for the kernel of existence; it's elusive, you know . . .

THE THIRD-FLOOR CLOSET

by **JACK RITCHIE**

When A. E. Williams discovered that Bertha Malloy was dead, he phoned the police.

I cut the siren of our squad car as Jennings and I turned up the long winding driveway and drove past the large well-tended lawn. We parked in the oval in front of the big house, behind two vans, both of which had *A. E. Williams Estate Services* lettered on their sides.

A covey of men and women, all of them in tan work uniforms, were waiting and Williams was their spokesman. "I just didn't know what to do in a situation like this. It's never happened to us before. And as far as I know, Mr. Hudson is in Europe or someplace. Maybe I should have called a doctor, but I don't know who Mrs. Malloy's doctor is and I don't know if it's appropriate to call in a strange doctor. And besides, Mrs. Malloy is quite dead, so a doctor couldn't have done anything anyway." He dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. "I imagine she died of a heart attack."

He led us into the house and through a huge kitchen to a small suite at its far end.

Bertha Malloy reclined in an easy chair, staring sightlessly ahead. She was a large woman, perhaps five foot ten and close to 200

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pounds. I estimated her age at about 40.

Williams was at my elbow. "Mrs. Malloy is—was Mr. Hudson's housekeeper." And then he explained his own presence. "I am Andrew E. Williams, of A. E. Williams Estate Services. We come here periodically to clean the house from top to bottom. Not that there's really much to do, what with Mr. Hudson gone all the time and the house empty. And we see to it that the grass is cut, hedges trimmed, and so on.

"This morning when we showed up at eight, Mrs. Malloy met us at the door like always and we went to work. At noon, when we take our lunch break, we all go to the kitchen where Mrs. Malloy always has coffee waiting. We supply our own food, but freshly brewed coffee is always welcome.

"Only this time there wasn't any coffee. And the door to her suite was open and she was just sitting there. So I spoke to her, but she didn't answer, and I saw how her eyes were open and her jaw sagging and—" He shuddered. "Well, she was dead."

I agreed. "Could anyone give us the names of some of Mrs. Malloy's relatives? I suppose one of the regular servants might have that information?"

"There are no other servants. Just Mrs. Malloy. She's sort of a housekeeper and caretaker in one, you might say. No household staff at all. That's probably because Mr. Hudson does so much traveling and he couldn't see any point in having a full staff of servants just standing around with nothing to do but collect wages."

"So Mrs. Malloy had the whole place to herself?"

"Yes. I once asked her if she didn't get lonely or afraid being the only one here. But she said she liked being alone and there was nothing to be afraid of. Besides, she had that big revolver."

"Revolver?"

"In that drawer over there. She opened it once to get something and I saw it and asked her about it. She said it was for protection."

I pulled open the drawer. A Colt .38 lay inside. I broke it open and found that one of the cartridges had been fired. I put the gun back. "How long have you been doing cleaning here?"

"Over three years now."

"And you don't know whether Mrs. Malloy has any relatives or where they could be found?"

"I'm afraid not. We used to talk over coffee sometimes, but she was always close-mouthed about some things. Like Mr. Hudson, for instance. But she did mention once that her husband was dead. Fell

down some stairs and broke his neck. And she has no children. If she has any relatives at all, I don't think they'd be from around here. She had quite a New England accent."

I moved over to a small desk near the window. On its blotter lay two checks. A large house key, evidently used as a paperweight, lay on top of them.

I studied the checks. One was made out to the Municipal Electric Company, apparently in payment of the monthly bill, and the other to Bertha Malloy in the sum of \$4,000. Both of them were dated yesterday and both of them were signed *Jacob Hudson*.

I turned back to Williams. "Are you positive that Hudson isn't in this house?"

"Well . . . I didn't see him anywhere. Neither did any of my people. I just assumed that he was off on a trip again."

"Could he be in the house without you knowing it?"

"I suppose so." Williams frowned. "There's the locked room."

"What locked room?"

"On the third floor. It's always locked. Mrs. Malloy said it was used for storage and we shouldn't ever bother with it."

"What does Hudson look like?"

"I've never seen him in the flesh. Neither has any of my people. But there are photographs around the house. He appears to be a rather small frail man nearing forty."

I picked up the key on the desk. "Let's see if this fits the lock to that third-floor room."

Williams led the way. On the third floor he stopped in front of a door at the end of the corridor. "This is it."

I tried the doorknob and verified that the door was locked. I rapped several times and then said, "This is the police. Is there anyone in there?"

We waited, but there was no answer.

I found that the key I'd brought along did fit and I unlocked the door. We stepped into a small bedroom.

Jennings sniffed the air. "Stale. I'll bet nobody's slept in that bed in years." He glanced around. "It sure doesn't look like a storeroom to me. Why would she want to keep it locked?"

I found that one door on the side of the room led to a bathroom. I tried the door of what I assumed must be the closet. It was locked. I tried my key again, but this time it didn't work.

I spoke to Williams. "Would you have any idea where the key to this closet might be found?"

"Not the faintest."

I studied the closet door for ten seconds and then made up my mind. "Do you have a hammer and a screwdriver in one of those vans of yours?"

Williams nodded and hurried downstairs. He returned almost immediately with a hammer and a screwdriver.

I used them to tap the hinge pins out of their sockets and Jennings and I pulled the closet door out of its frame.

We found Jacob Hudson.

He lay on a mattress on the floor, a small man under a blanket. His eyes were closed. His sallow complexion indicated plainly that he hadn't seen the sun in some time.

Jennings stared wide-eyed. "Is he alive?" Then he knelt down. "He's breathing, but he looks unconscious. Maybe drugged. We'd better radio for an ambulance."

When the medics arrived, two orderlies lifted Hudson onto a stretcher and carried him down the stairs.

Jennings watched the ambulance pull away. "How long do you suppose she kept him in there? The whole three years nobody's seen him? Why didn't she just kill him?"

I didn't have the answer. "Maybe she just couldn't bring herself to go that far. Or maybe she needed him to sign the checks."

While Jennings radioed headquarters, I went back upstairs with a flashlight and examined the closet. It was just big enough to hold the mattress. The light socket overhead contained no bulb.

Had it been pitch-black in here, or had there been at least a sliver of light from under the door? What had it been like to lie here day after day in the darkness?

I directed the beam of my flashlight around the small room, pausing at a spot above the door frame.

I found something.

When I signed out at headquarters at the end of my shift, I went back to my apartment to make my supper. I detest eating out.

I have been with the Police Department for almost ten years, all of that time in squad cars. My record is good. I am diligent, prompt, and dependable, and I will undoubtedly be promoted to plainclothes in another year or so. And in 15 years more I will retire, probably as a detective-sergeant.

Both of my grandfathers were policemen and one of them retired as a precinct captain. My father was a sergeant when he was killed

in the line of duty while attempting to arbitrate a domestic quarrel.

I have a brother and a sister. Both of them are with the department and I would not be at all surprised if Emily became the first female police chief in the history of our city. She is hard-working, driving, and dedicated.

In short, I come from a police family.

To my brother and my sister, policework is more than a job. It is a way of life. On the other hand, I chose police work because of family pressure and our liberal retirement system.

I had, of course, been thinking about Hudson all day. As far as Jennings and I were concerned, he was no longer our concern. The men in plainclothes would take over the case.

Had they questioned Hudson already? Or had the doctors at the hospital told them that they would have to wait? Had Hudson opened his eyes yet?

When I finished eating, I stacked the dishes in the sink. Usually—during the warm months—I spend the waning hours of the day in my garden.

It is really not much of a plot, certainly not in size. It is 12 by 20 feet and the space was reluctantly allowed to me by my building superintendent. It is bounded on the west by a graveled parking lot and receives a great deal too much shade from surrounding buildings. However, I have made do. The garden has become my place of refreshment, the center of my day.

Today, however, I would do no gardening. Instead I went down to my car and drove to the County General Hospital.

At the main desk I identified myself and Hudson's room number was given to me without hesitation.

I took the elevator to the fourth floor and found room 446. I paused in the open doorway.

Hudson lay on the bed, the coverlet almost up to his chin. His eyes were open and he frowned as he stared at the ceiling.

When he saw me, alarm flashed in his eyes.

"It's all right," I said. "There's nothing to be afraid of." I moved to a chair beside his bed. "Have you been questioned yet?"

He shook his head. "No. I've been too weak to answer any questions." But he had one of his own. "Mrss. Malloy?"

"She's dead. Possibly a heart attack."

He blinked. "Heart attack? She was only in her late thirties. One wouldn't expect someone that young to die of a heart attack."

"No," I said. "One wouldn't."

He put a hand over his eyes and I thought that he wasn't going to speak again, but then he said, "She let me out of that closet just twice a day. For a few minutes. To go to the bathroom and to give me my food. And sometimes she would make me sign blank checks. And letters that she'd type. To my relatives to make them think that I was traveling abroad. I suppose she had some kind of a mail-forwarding arrangement so that they would arrive at their destinations with foreign postmarks on them. Checks, letters, even holiday cards. She forced me to sign them all."

"Forced?"

"Yes. She always had a revolver with her." He put his hand over his eyes for a moment again. "It all started about three years ago when I fired her. She was so inefficient and insolent that one day I just gave her notice. Told her that she was fired."

"But the firing didn't take?"

"No. She simply refused to go. She grabbed me bodily and flung me into that closet and locked the door."

"Didn't you try to escape?"

"Of course. But the closet has a solid oak door. I was never able to get hold of tools or implements of any kind. And even when she let me out, by no stretch of the imagination could I have overpowered her. You've seen her, haven't you? Really a big woman."

I nodded again. "About once a month she had some cleaning people come into the house. If you'd made some noises, they might have heard you."

He rubbed his neck. "I never heard them. She must have drugged me when she expected them to come to the house. I remember that sometimes I'd go to sleep and wake with the impression that I had slept a long, long time."

I studied him. "Mr. Hudson, you tell an interesting story."

He brightened. "Really?"

"Unfortunately it isn't a true story."

He eyed me warily.

I pulled two keys from my pocket. "I found these lying on the top of the door frame *inside* the closet. One of them fits the closet door and the other the door to the hallway. In other words, Mr. Hudson, you could get out of that closet—and the house, for that matter—anytime you wanted to."

His face lost what little color it had.

"Somehow you got hold of those two keys. When or where I don't know. You could have gotten out, but you didn't. Why not? Did you

have other plans? Revenge, perhaps? For what Mrs. Malloy had done to you? Did you sneak out and maybe drop something into her food? Something that would kill her?"

He sat up in quick protest. "But that's absolute nonsense. I would never poison anyone. Certainly not Mrs. Malloy. I insist that you perform an autopsy. On Mrs. Malloy, of course. I'm positive that you will find that she died of something perfectly legal." He thought for a moment and then covered another base. "But *if* she died of poisoning or by some other foul means, I certainly had no part in it."

Funny, but I believed him. I thought there was some other answer to his being in that closet. Something different. Something private. That was why I hadn't shown those keys to anyone else, why I had come here alone. "Why don't you just tell me the truth now, Mr. Hudson. The whole truth."

He closed his eyes to regroup his thoughts and then said, "She was insane."

"Mrs. Malloy?"

"Oh, no. Not Mrs. Malloy. She was in perfect possession of her senses. Very dependable and conscientious. I was referring to my mother. She died six years ago."

He decided to make himself more comfortable by adjusting the hospital bed so that he could sit up with back support. "It all began when I was nine years old. My father was killed in an automobile accident while driving me to a cub scout meeting. I received only superficial bruises. My mother took his death extremely hard and she blamed me for it. After all, it had been my idea to join the cub scouts.

"She had never been the most stable personality to begin with, but now she began having spells. Violent spells during which she would beat me. Thoroughly.

"I tried to keep away from her as much as possible, especially since there was no way to anticipate when one of these spells would occur. And when they did and I wasn't immediately available, she would come looking for me. Literally search the house and usually she found me. I tried hiding place after hiding place without much success until one day I happened on that third-floor bedroom and saw the closet door with the key in the lock. I hid inside the closet, locking the door from the inside.

"Her search brought her into the room. She even tried the closet-door knob, but apparently she assumed that because it was locked, I couldn't have gotten in there in the first place. And she went off

searching other places until the spell finally wore off."

He sighed. "Of course I could not avoid her entirely. There were times when she would catch me unawares and give me a beating. Once she came into my bedroom in the middle of the night. After that I couldn't sleep in my bed at all. So I moved a mattress and a pillow into the third-floor closet and spent my nights there.

"I tell you, it was a relief to be sent to boarding school. How I dreaded coming home for holidays and vacations, but my mother insisted. And then, after I graduated from college, I was home and available to her at all times."

I interrupted. "You mean that she was still beating you even when you were an adult?"

He smiled faintly. "As you can see, I am barely five feet tall and weigh less than one hundred pounds. My mother was quite a large woman, about the size of Mrs. Malloy. The last time she managed to catch me before I could get to my closet, I was thirty-two years old. That was a month or so before her death. She was run down by a delivery truck in the parking lot of a supermarket."

"Why did you stay here? Why didn't you leave?"

"Frankly, I am psychologically incapable of coping with the outside world. I suppose the beatings had something to do with that. And I had no money in my own name. So I remained here and tried to keep alert."

He smiled again. "I'm ashamed to admit it, but I was elated at her death. I was now *free*. Yes, completely elated. For perhaps two or three days. And then I became—well, restless. So I went upstairs, just to *visit* the closet. And the mattress was still there, and the pillow, and I thought, why don't I just take a nap? As long as I was there anyway, and I *was* a little sleepy. And so I entered the closet, locked the door, and went to sleep."

He shook his head. "Eventually I had to admit that even though my mother was now dead, the only place where I felt any degree of security was in that closet."

"You should have tried psychiatric help."

"I did. Immediately. And I continued trying for three years. But finally I came to the conclusion that they could not help me. I simply wasn't going to be 'cured.' As the twig is bent, so grows the tree, and I was too old to be rebent. So I said the hell with the psychiatrists."

"And you retreated into the closet?"

"It wasn't quite that simple. You see, there were the servants. I

had been quite circumspect and secretive about my closet, but now that I had decided to make my occupancy full time, so to speak, they would certainly learn about it. And that could lead to all kinds of complications. Word would certainly get out, especially to my relatives. It would be a good bet—more likely a certainty—that they would, out of the kindness of their hearts, see to it that I was committed to an institution. They would also very likely volunteer to administer my estate. No, no. Disappearing into a closet isn't at all as easy as it appears at first glance."

"You discharged the servants?"

"Yes. But I saw to it that all of them got generous severance payments and I also got them other commensurate employment. And to allay suspicions, if they had any, I told them that I had decided to travel extensively and that therefore I did not think it economically sound to retain a full staff."

"But you kept Mrs. Malloy?"

"Actually she wasn't one of the regular staff at all. I had to go looking for her. I wanted someone who could be trusted to run things around here and keep her mouth shut. After all, it was still necessary to keep up the physical appearance of the estate. I couldn't have the grounds going to ruin, with weeds growing tall and that type of thing, because inevitably that would lead to questions and investigations.

"So I went to a detective agency out east and had a search conducted. I interviewed a number of prospects and Mrs. Malloy appeared to be the most suitable. A splendid woman with no relatives. I paid her a handsome salary to run things here and especially to keep her mouth shut."

"And so you spent these last three years in that closet? Coming out only a few minutes a day to take care of some basic functions?"

"In reality, I was out more than that. I'd say that I daily averaged about four hours out and twenty in. I would go downstairs and watch television or read, because a mind unfed is a mind dead. And sometimes on moonlit nights I would stretch my legs by going for a stroll on the back grounds." He chuckled. "One night I forgot to inform Mrs. Malloy that I was going out and she mistook me for an intruder. She took a shot at me with her revolver. She was quite a watchdog, though a poor shot."

I still found the story a bit difficult to believe. "You spent twenty hours a day just lying there in the dark?"

"I would close my eyes and search the universe for the kernel of

existence. It's very elusive, you know. And, of course, I suppose that I *did* do an awful lot of sleeping, or trying to. After all, the human brain isn't geared for too much or too severe thinking."

He sighed. "When you began tapping the hinge bolts out of the door, I was utterly terrified. I suspected that something drastic must have happened to Mrs. Malloy. How could I explain my presence in the closet? I had never even *anticipated* that such an occasion might occur. And I didn't dare tell the truth. So I quickly hid those two keys, because I thought that if anyone searched me, the keys would be embarrassing to explain, and then I just went limp."

"Limp?"

"Yes. I thought that was about the most intelligent thing to do under the circumstances. Go limp. Close my eyes and pretend to be unconscious. Play for time until I could find out what was going on and think of some explanation the world could accept. And so, lying here, I put together the story about Mrs. Malloy imprisoning me. I hope, wherever she is, that she will forgive me."

He closed his eyes. "Now I'll be the subject of newspaper stories and magazine articles and I'll be committed to a mental institution."

The eyes opened for a moment of hope. "You don't suppose they'll let me have my own closet?"

It was a beautiful Sunday and I worked in the garden until nearly noon. Then I went inside, washed my hands, and made myself a sandwich.

When I finished eating it, I made another, poured a glass of milk, and put them both, along with three apricots and some vitamin tablets, on a tray.

I took the tray upstairs to the third-floor bedroom and put it on a small table next to the closet door. I rapped twice to let Hudson know that his lunch was ready and the milk cold.

I picked up the two checks he'd signed—one to cover a payment to his book club and the other my salary for the month of July.

It has been nearly a year since I resigned from the Police Department and, as far as Hudson's relatives—or the world, for that matter—are concerned, he is now in India and Sri Lanka.

I would probably see Hudson at ten thirty tonight. The late TV movie was going to be a Western and he was rather partial to John Wayne.

I went back outside into the warm garden.

My closet, I suppose.

a **NEW Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by**

EDWARD D. HOCH

Dr. Sam Hawthorne is summoned for jury duty, and in Northmont's old courthouse, during the course of a murder trial, Sheriff Lens can say, "Doc, you draw corpses like flies, I swear!" . . . Help yourself to a small—ah—libation. Fine! Comfortable in that easy chair? A few snacks with your wine? Good! Now, let's go back in Doc's memory machine—back to 1928—and revel in another "impossible crime" . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE COURTHOUSE GARGOYLE

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

66 **I** promised to tell you about the time I was called to jury duty down at the old courthouse," Dr. Sam Hawthorne said, as he poured two glasses of white wine. "It was in September of 1928, when the presidential race between Hoover and Al Smith was really heatin' up, that I received my first and only summons to jury duty in Northmont. Ordinarily I wouldn't have been chosen for a criminal case, since everyone in town knew of my long friendship with Sheriff Lens and my interest in solving local mysteries. But this case had actually occurred in a neighboring town. The defense requested a change of venue because of all the bad publicity, so the trial was moved to Northmont . . ."

Summer had lingered in our area that year (Dr. Sam Hawthorne continued), and the leaves had not yet begun to turn as I strolled down Main Street and entered the courthouse. It was a large vulgar building of darkened stone, built at the turn of the century by some

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town fathers who envisioned a growth for Northmont that never occurred. Though only two stories high it covered a small block near the town square, its peaked roof guarded by four honest-to-goodness gargoyles that were the delight of small children and the embarrassment of their elders.

Twenty-five men and women had been summoned to the second-floor courtroom where Judge Bailey presided. Mostly they were men, because in those days only a few women were on the juror rolls in Northmont. We were shepherded in by the court clerk, Tim Chaucer, an old duffer who walked with a limp he had got in the Argonne. He was so ugly that some folks called him the courthouse's fifth gargoyle, but old Tim didn't seem to mind.

The case to be tried involved the murder of a farmer in the neighboring town of Cudbury. He had been a popular man, the largest landowner in the county, and he'd been killed in his barn by a single shotgun blast. The man accused of the crime was a young hired hand who'd drifted into the area and been hired to help with the chores. His name was Aaron Flavor, and he was 23 years old.

I hadn't known the dead man, Walt Jostrow, except by name, and I was a natural one to be chosen for the jury. Before the day was out I found myself impaneled along with nine other men and two women, with an extra man chosen as an alternate. Judge Bailey informed us that we would not be sequestered during the presentation of evidence, but only during our deliberations. He said he expected the trial to last about a week, and hoped we wouldn't be inconvenienced by it. As he spoke he sipped some water from a glass at his elbow. A water pitcher and two other glasses stood ready for use on a small tray between the judge's chair and the witness stand.

Under ordinary circumstances a week away from my medical practice would have been an inconvenience, especially to my patients. But that summer another doctor had set up practice in Northmont, relieving some of the pressure. This fellow, Bob Yale, was just out of a Boston internship, attracted to Northmont by plans for a new small hospital. He reminded me of myself six years earlier when I'd arrived to set up practice, and we were close enough in age to become fast friends. He volunteered to look after my patients while I was on jury duty.

Though my medical practice was being tended to, I still made a habit of dropping by the office during the noon recess, to check with my nurse April and look at the morning mail. By Thursday, the

fourth day of the trial, she barely glanced up as I entered. "How'd it go this morning?"

"Middling," I replied. "The prosecution rested its case. After lunch it's the defense's turn."

"Do you think he's guilty?"

"Can't talk about that. No one's denying he fired the shotgun. It's just a matter of deciding whether it was murder or an accident. The prosecution tried to prove Aaron Flavor was having an affair with Jostrow's wife. That would establish a motive for the killing."

April nodded smugly. "I been hearing stories of some pretty juicy testimony."

"Sometimes I think these small towns are made of rumors! I suppose it was even worse over in Cudbury if they had to move the trial away." I glanced through the mail but there was nothing of interest. "Guess I'll grab a sandwich and get back to the courthouse."

"Can't you even give me a hint of the testimony?" April pleaded.

"I'll tell you all about it after the trial," I promised. "Till then I'm not supposed to discuss it with anyone."

At the coffee shop where I usually ate lunch I saw one of my fellow jurors, Mrs. Landsmith. She was a stout woman in her fifties who'd been a clerk at the dry goods store for as long as I'd been in Northmont. "Come sit with me, Dr. Sam," she invited. "It's good to get out of that stuffy courtroom for a bit."

"Well," I said, sliding into the cramped wooden booth opposite her, "it should only last a day or two more."

"I hope so!"

Sheriff Lens came in at that moment, pausing at the cigar counter to buy a plug of chewing tobacco. He saw us in the booth and strolled over to chat. "How do you like bein' a juror?"

"It's a change."

"Your patients will learn to get along without you," he said with a chuckle.

"I hope not."

The sheriff walked back to the courthouse with Mrs. Landsmith and me. Then he waved goodbye as he cut across the dusty, cindered parking lot to the jail in the next block. "That's Judge Bailey's car," Mrs. Landsmith said, pointing to a black Packard sedan. "They say he earns good money for a small-town judge."

"He's impressed me during the trial," I said. "Never had too much dealing with the man before."

The afternoon session opened with a defense statement by Aaron

Flavor's attorney, a man from Cudbury named Simmons. He seemed good enough at his job, though there was something just a bit too routine about his presentation, as if he was going through the motions in a case already decided. I wondered whether he thought he had it won or lost, because as a juror I certainly didn't know.

After the opening statement Simmons called his only witness, the defendant himself. Aaron Flavor was a handsome young man with sandy hair, his face and arms deeply tanned by a summer's work in the fields. He'd sat with his lawyer during the whole week, rarely changing expression. Even when the dead man's wife testified that Aaron had often paused in his chores to talk with her, the young man only allowed himself the hint of a smile, as if remembering those days in the warm July sun.

"Now then," Simmons said, rubbing his hands together in a nervous gesture he'd used before, "tell us in your own words what happened on the afternoon of Monday, July 23rd."

"Well," Flavor began, scratching his forehead, "I'd been working in the field since early morning, bringing in the hay. There was just me and Walt—Mr. Jostrow—'cause the other field hand was sick that day."

"You were living at the Jostrow house at the time?"

"Right. I'd been there since the spring planting season, helpin' with chores."

"Was there any unusual relationship between you and Mrs. Jostrow during this time?"

"No, sir! She was the wife of my employer and that was all. She prepared the meals and sometimes I'd help her with chores around the house."

"We have seen that Mrs. Jostrow, widow of the deceased, is a woman in her late twenties—closer in age to yourself than to her husband. And we have seen that she is quite an attractive woman. We have heard reports—town gossip—to the effect that there was something illicit between you. Was there any truth to these stories?"

"No, sir!" Aaron Flavor's voice was loud and firm as he replied, though I noticed he ran his hand nervously along the seat of the witness stand as he spoke, in a gesture similar to one Mrs. Jostrow had used. Husbands and wives often picked up each other's nervous habits and I found myself wondering if lovers did the same.

"Please continue with your account of the afternoon in question, Mr. Flavor."

"Well, I was in the barn when Mr. Jostrow came in from the field

and said there were some pesky crows in the north forty. He told me to bring the shotgun from the house so he could scare 'em away."

"And you did that?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Jostrow was in the house at the time?"

"Yes."

"Did you have any conversation with her?"

"Not so's I remember." He rubbed his sweating hands against his pants and glanced over at us in the jury box.

"Was the shotgun loaded when you fetched it from the house?"

"I loaded two shells of birdshot on the way to the barn."

"Why did you do that?"

"Just to help Mr. Jostrow. If he was goin' after them crows I wanted him to have the shotgun all loaded and ready."

"What happened when you reached the barn?"

"He was right there inside the door. I came in out of the sunlight and I didn't see a milk stool settin' there. I tripped on it and as I tried to catch myself the gun went off. It hit him right in the chest. I swear to God I didn't mean to shoot him."

"What did you do then?"

"I ran to the house and got Mrs. Jostrow. He was a terrible mess, bleedin' all over. By the time we got back he was dead."

Judge Bailey had been following the testimony with interest. Now he leaned forward to signal the court clerk with an empty water pitcher. Old Tim Chaucer hobbled forward to get the pitcher, and every eye in the courtroom followed him. Apparently he'd neglected to fill the pitcher during the noon recess, and now he took it to the water fountain in the far wall, opposite the jury box. He let the water bubble out and caught it in the pitcher, filling it about three-quarters of the way up. Then he hobbled back and set it on the tray, right next to the three glasses.

"Excuse the interruption," Judge Bailey said. "The throat grows dry after so many hours."

I glanced toward the rear of the courtroom and noticed that Bob Yale, the new young doctor, had slipped into a seat in the last row. For a moment I thought he'd come with some urgent message for me, but he seemed as intent on the proceedings as everyone else.

My attention was drawn back to the bench, where Judge Bailey seemed to ignore the renewed questioning by Simmons while he picked up the water glass nearest him and peered through his spectacles at the rim.

"... and then Mrs. Jostrow called the sheriff," Aaron Flavor was saying.

Judge Bailey ran his finger around the rim of the glass and apparently detected a chip or crack. He set it back on the tray and took one of the remaining glasses. Lifting the pitcher, he poured the water until his glass was half full.

"The shooting was completely accidental?" Simmons asked the defendant.

"Completely! I swear it!" Aaron Flavor's face was twisted with emotion, as if he were reliving the awful moment. I decided in that instant he was either an innocent man or a good actor.

Judge Bailey lifted the water glass to his lips and drank.

He made a face almost at once and put down the glass. Then, as I watched from the jury box with unbelieving eyes, he grabbed at his throat and uttered a gasp of pain.

I was still young enough to swing myself over the railing of the jury box and that's just what I did. I was a doctor first, and Judge Bailey needed me. The courtroom was in a turmoil when I reached him, with both lawyers and Tim Chaucer close behind. I caught him as he slumped from his chair and smelled the deadly odor of bitter almonds on his breath.

"He's been poisoned!" I shouted over my shoulder. "Get help!"

Judge Bailey tried to speak, and as I leaned forward I heard him say, quite distinctly, "... gargoyle ..."

Then I realized I was holding a dead man in my arms.

The courtroom turmoil continued and it took several minutes to restore order. By that time Bob Yale had joined me at the judge's side. "What do you make of it, Sam? Heart attack?"

I shook my head. "Poison. Bitter almonds. That makes it some form of cyanide."

"My God! In the water?"

"Where else?"

"But everyone in the courtroom saw Tim Chaucer fill the pitcher from the fountain over there! How could it be poisoned?"

"I'm telling you *what*, not *how*."

Sheriff Lens pushed his way through the crowd to join us. "Doc, you draw corpses like flies, I swear!"

"Better get your prisoner out of here and clear the courtroom, Sheriff. We've got a murder on our hands—one that's a lot more mysterious than the case we were trying."

"Who'd want to kill Judge Bailey?"

"That's what we have to find out."

An alternate judge was brought in long enough to declare a mistrial, and we were dismissed as jurors. The defendant, Aaron Flavor, was remanded to a jail cell in lieu of bail. The victim's widow, Sarah Jostrow, seemed to be devastated by this latest act of violence and had to be led from the courtroom in tears.

"Where are we?" Sheriff Lens said to me later, when we were finally alone in the courtroom. "You've helped me on these crazy cases before, Doc, an' I sure need your help on this one! The voters'll have my scalp for lettin' a judge be poisoned in his own courtroom."

I stood back and stared at the empty seats. "There's always the possibility he poisoned himself. He might have had some cyanide salt crystals concealed in his hand and swallowed them with the water."

"You believe that for a minute, Doc?"

"No," I admitted. "Far as we know he had no reason for suicide. And if he did he'd more likely perform the act in private. It's almost certainly murder."

"How?"

I thought about that. "Three forms of cyanide exist—the gaseous, which some states are starting to use as a method of execution, the colorless liquid called prussic acid, and the cyanide salts. I think we can rule out gaseous, and liquid seems the most likely. I can still smell bitter almonds in this water glass the judge used."

"How about the pitcher?"

I sniffed it and shook my head. "I don't think so, but you'd better have it analyzed."

"How could anyone have poisoned the glass or the pitcher? From what you've told me, everyone was watching Chaucer while he went for the water, and everyone watched the judge when he drank it."

"The judge may have felt that Chaucer did it. His dying word was *gargoyle*."

"Meaning Tim Chaucer?"

"Who else?"

"Let's go talk to him."

We found Chaucer in the little office reserved for the court clerk. He was bent over a desk drawer, cleaning out an accumulation of pencils and notepads, stacking them on the desk next to a picture of himself in his wartime master sergeant's uniform. He looked up and said, "You don't have to tell me. I know I'm fired."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Judge Bailey was the only friend I had here. Maitland hates my guts. But Bailey was a real gentleman. He's the one who kept me on the job when people started callin' me names behind my back."

"Names like gargoyle, Tim?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's right. Why you gotta have a pretty face for this job is more than I know!"

"How'd the poison get into the water, Tim?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"Beats me!"

"Did you put it there?"

"I just told you the judge was my friend."

"But maybe you thought he'd stopped being your friend. Maybe you poisoned him."

"No, no!" It was almost a wail. "Go away, leave me alone!" He limped over to the coat rack. "You can see I'm goin'. You don't have to drive me out."

I placed a kindly hand on his shoulder. "We might want you to stay, Tim, if we can get to the bottom of this case. Tell me something—did you catch the odor of bitter almonds any time while you were filling that pitcher?"

"Don't know what bitter almonds smell like," he answered. "Don't even know what plain almonds smell like. Never had any in my life."

"The judge's last word before he died was *gargoyle*. Could he have meant you?"

"No, not him! He never called me that! I was always Tim to the judge."

"One more thing. Did you forget to fill the water pitcher during the lunch hour, before court resumed?"

"No, I didn't forget. Always filled it whenever the judge asked me to."

Sheriff Lens told him to stay on the job for the present and we went out into the hall.

I spotted my fellow juror, Mrs. Landsmith, talking with the defense lawyer, Simmons. "Wasn't that a terrible thing?" she asked, shaking her head sadly. "And to happen right there in front of our eyes!"

"It's terrible for my client," Simmons interjected. "Now he sits in his cell till they decide to retry him. I'm going to move that the indictment be dismissed, or that he be freed on his own recognizance."

"Not much chance of that," Sheriff Lens said. "Young Flavor's unmarried, without any family or roots in the community. He's a wanderer, and once they let him out of jail that's the last we'll see of him."

Simmons tucked his briefcase under his arm. "I hope the courts take a different view, Sheriff."

As he strode away down the hall, Mrs. Landsmith asked me, "Now that we're dismissed, you can tell me, Dr. Sam. How would you have voted on the case?"

"I honestly hadn't made up my mind."

"I'll tell you what I think," she said. "I think that Mrs. Jostrow killed her husband and Aaron Flavor is taking the blame for it. All during her testimony she was chewin' gum. I don't never trust a woman who chews gum in public."

"You may have a point there—I mean, about Flavor's taking the blame," I admitted.

"How do you think the judge was killed? Is the whole water system poisoned? I've been afraid to drink out of the fountains since it happened."

"The fountains are safe." The first thing I'd done after Judge Bailey died in my arms was to check the fountain in the courtroom. The water was pure, and there was no evidence of funny business with the spigot.

"Thank heaven for that!" Mrs. Landsmith said, and went off to try one.

Our other local judge—the one who'd dismissed us—was Bruce Maitland. He was a stout friendly man closely identified with local politics. While Sheriff Lens went back to the jail to check on Aaron Flavor, I decided to pay a call on Judge Maitland in his chambers.

"Well, Dr. Hawthorne." He waved me in. "You were on that jury I dismissed, weren't you?"

I nodded. "My one chance for jury duty in this town. I'll probably never get another one."

"I don't know about that. Northmont is growing. We'll need more doctors, and more juries too. What's on your mind?"

"The same thing that's on yours, I'm sure. Judge Bailey."

He shook his head sadly. "Poor fellow. Who'd want to kill him like that?"

"I came to ask you the same thing."

"He had no enemies—except perhaps criminals whom he'd sentenced in the past. We all have those. It goes with the job."

"I spoke with old Tim Chaucer. He seemed to think you'd fire him as clerk of the court now that Bailey is dead."

"Well, I can't pretend I'm fond of Chaucer. The man's ugly!"

"He was wounded fighting for his country."

"And that's the only reason we've kept him as long as we have." He lit a cigar, plucked carefully from a box of Havanas on his desk. "I hope the sheriff is investigating his connection with Bailey's death."

"Tim claims he had nothing to do with it."

"But he filled the pitcher, didn't he? He was the only one who could have poisoned it."

"We don't know the pitcher was poisoned. In fact, it probably wasn't."

Maitland looked confused. "But—"

"Maybe Bailey was killed some other way, and the poison slipped into his glass when everyone was milling around the bench afterward." It sounded good but I knew it wasn't true. I'd been the first one to reach that glass and sniff it, before anyone else arrived. Still, Maitland looked worried enough for me to push on. "You were on the bench yourself, Judge, when you ordered the mistrial."

"Do you suspect me of killing my dear friend? I was here in my chambers when it happened."

"As he was dying he mentioned the word *gargoyle*. Do you know what he meant?"

"No idea, unless it was a reference to Tim Chaucer."

"He never called him that. It's not likely he'd do so as he was dying."

"Perhaps you misunderstood him. He might have been trying to say *gargle*, or *car girl*."

"No, he said *gargoyle*. There are some on top of this building, you know."

"Of course. On each corner. Bailey and I had our picture taken with one when they brought it down for cleaning last summer."

"I remember that."

Judge Maitland stood up, signaling an end to the conversation. "Feel free to drop in any time, Dr. Hawthorne. And take a cigar with you."

"I never smoke them." I paused at the door. "Will you be firing Tim Chaucer now?"

Judge Maitland sighed. "I expect so."

I went outside and spent the next few moments staring up at the

courthouse gargoyles. They were four ugly beasts, with elongated necks and open mouths to serve as water spouts. These had been plugged up when the gargoyles were repaired the summer before, because people complained of the streams of water they ejected during a storm. Now rooftop gutters caught it all, and pipes conducted it to the ground. The fabulous beasts were merely a decorative reminder of the past.

While I was standing there, Sheriff Lens came along the sidewalk from the jail across the street. "Damn it, Doc, I just had a call from the state police. They're offering to move in an' take over the investigation if I can't handle it!"

"Calm down, Sheriff. You know how they get sometimes. After all, the poisoning of a judge in his courtroom during a murder trial is going to be big news. There's no way you can limit it to Northmont alone. Tomorrow morning it'll make the Boston papers, and even the New York ones."

"But this is my town, my investigation!"

"Let's try to keep it that way. If we can solve the mystery within the next few hours that should satisfy everyone."

He gave me a puzzled look. "How we goin' to do that, Doc? You know how the judge was poisoned?"

"No, not yet. But I know he was trying to tell me something about one of those gargoyles. Is there any way we could examine them?"

"Not unless you want to climb out on the roof. Remember last year? They had one hell of a time gettin' them down for repairs."

"I remember. Still, the slant of that roof isn't too steep. A young agile man could reach them without any trouble."

"You thinkin' of yourself, Doc?"

"I'm thinking Bob Yale might be even better, with me along to hang onto him."

I phoned Bob at his office and he came around quickly. Happily it was a healthy time for both his patients and mine. But when he saw the old courthouse roof he balked a bit. "You want us to climb up there, Sam?"

"Sure. A few years back you'd have thought nothing of it. Pretend you're still a kid. I'll have a rope attached to your belt so's you can't fall."

He chuckled. "Tie us together like mountain climbers. If I go I want you right behind me."

"Fair enough."

"What do you expect to find in those gargoyles?"

"I don't know. Even though they were plugged up last year, something may be inside them."

He stared up at the roof. "Have we got to check all four of them?"

"Not if we get lucky."

He took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. "All right, Sam. Which one do we try first?"

I thought about that. Finally I said, "Bailey had his picture taken next to one of the gargoyles. We should be able to figure which corner it's at by studying the background of the photo. That's the one we'll try first."

We could make out the front door of the courthouse in the picture, over on the right side. That meant the gargoyle on the ground between Bailey and Maitland was the one from the left-front corner as you faced the building. Once we were out on the roof that's the one we headed for. Bob Yale had a rope around his waist, looped around one of the big old courthouse chimneys, but to tell the truth it wasn't very dangerous.

"I used to climb apple trees that were tougher than this," he called back to me as he edged along the slate roof.

"Just be careful when you're out at the edge. I don't want to lose Northmont's only other doctor."

He straddled the gargoyle and began feeling the crevices of the stone monster. "What am I supposed to be looking for?"

"They were plugged with something, to close the spouts."

"Sure were—cement!"

"Oh."

"No way I can get through this. Sam." He twisted his lean body to gain better leverage, but the blockage still resisted him. "You'd have to lower this to the ground and go at it with a pickax."

Standing by the chimney with a firm grip on the other end of the rope, I wondered if it had been a waste of time. I could see people in the street below looking up and pointing at us, and I felt just the least bit ridiculous. "Try the mouth," I shouted back.

"What?"

"Try the mouth. They sealed the back of the spout with cement, but you should be able to reach into the open mouth."

He stretched out as far as he could along the gargoyle's neck, and I prayed it would support his weight. "I've got something!" he called. I saw his hand emerge from the monster's mouth with a small packet, and I sighed with relief. Maybe it hadn't been a crazy idea after all.

I hauled up on the rope and he scrambled over the slate to join me at the chimney. In his hand he clutched a thick packet wrapped in oilskin and tied with heavy cord. "His own private time capsule," I remarked, weighing the thing in my hand. "He probably figured it wouldn't be found till the next time the gargoyles were cleaned."

"What's in it?" Yale asked.

"Let's get off this roof and have a look."

With Sheriff Lens peering over our shoulders we carefully unwrapped our discovery. There were papers inside, legal documents showing that Bailey and Judge Maitland had been secret investors in a Boston speakeasy. "I'll be damned!" the sheriff snorted. "Who'd of thought it of those two?"

Bob Yale looked up at me. "A motive for murder?"

I shrugged. "Could be. Obviously Bailey felt guilty enough about it to entrust these confessional documents to posterity. Let's go call on Judge Maitland."

"Do you still need me?" Yale asked.

"No. You did nobly up on that roof."

"I just wonder where they'd have found a doctor if we both fell off, Sam."

Judge Maitland listened distastefully as I told him what we'd found in the gargoyle's mouth. When I'd finished he said, "Obviously Bailey felt he was doing something wrong by investing in that club. I feel just the opposite. A judge can invest his money just like anyone else. Owning part of a restaurant in Boston certainly doesn't conflict with my responsibilities on the bench in Northmont."

"It's not a restaurant, Judge Maitland. It's a speakeasy, operating in violation of the law."

"If Al Smith gets elected that might all change."

"I didn't come here to argue politics. I'm helping Sheriff Lens investigate a murder."

"And you think I killed Bailey to keep our business venture a secret?" He snorted at the idea. "First of all, I don't consider I'm doing anything wrong. Second, I wish you'd tell me how I could have poisoned Bailey's water when I wasn't even in the courtroom at the time."

I had to admit he had me stumped there. Bailey had died with the word *gargoyle* on his lips, but maybe it had nothing to do with his murder. Maybe it was simply that his last conscious thoughts had been of the guilty secret he'd hidden away for posterity.

"All right," I said, heading for the door. "I'll talk to you later."

"Hawthorne—"

"What is it?"

"What are you going to do with those papers you found?"

I turned and stared at him. The mask had dropped away. He was a frightened man. "I'll see," I told him. "I haven't decided yet."

There were people outside standing in little groups in front of the courthouse. Maybe they'd seen me on the roof with Dr. Yale and wondered what was going on. It was my nurse April who spotted me and came running up. "Dr. Sam, come quick! Sheriff Lens has found something!"

I followed her on the run without asking more. Lens was waiting in my office and what he produced couldn't have surprised me more. "Take a whiff of this, Doc," he said, holding out a tiny vial of colorless liquid.

"Prussic acid," I said. "Where'd you find it, Sheriff?"

"In a trash barrel down the street. I was walking behind that lawyer fellow, Simmons, and I seen him toss it in."

"Very interesting."

"Do you think Simmons did it?" April asked. "But he wasn't anywhere near the judge, was he?"

"We'll ask him about it," I said. "But first I have another suggestion—one that might wind up this case in a hurry. I want a reenactment of the crime in the same courtroom this evening."

"What's that?"

"You heard me, Sheriff. I want the lawyers and the defendant and as many of the jury and spectators as we can round up on short notice. I want everything the same as it was this afternoon, including Tim Chaucer and the water pitcher."

"You mean you can solve the case tonight, Doc? You can show us how Judge Bailey was killed?"

"Maybe, if my luck holds."

"All right. When it comes to these crazy impossible killings you're the expert, Doc. But even if I can round these people up, the most important one's goin' to be missing."

"Judge Bailey."

"Right. I can't produce his body for your reenactment."

"I just might be able to persuade Judge Maitland to sit in for that role."

"Maitland!"

I nodded. "Have everyone there at eight o'clock, Sheriff. . ."

Promptly at eight o'clock I entered the jury box and took my seat next to Mrs. Landsmith. Almost everyone was there—the jurors, Tim Chaucer at his clerk's desk, the prosecuting attorney, the accused, Aaron Flavor, seated next to Simmons for the defense, the victim's widow in the front row, a scattering of spectators, and even Bob Yale occupying a seat at the rear just as he'd done that afternoon. Only the judge's bench was empty, but almost at once Tim Chaucer leaped to his feet to announce the arrival of Justice Maitland.

We all stood up as Maitland took the bench, glaring down at us. Then he said, "I have been persuaded to lend my presence to this charade only because I'm told it could result in a solution to the terrible crime which took place this afternoon. However, this is still a court of law, and I will allow no antics that might in any way influence the forthcoming second trial of the accused, Aaron Flavor." He turned toward the jury box and said, "You may proceed, Dr. Hawthorne."

I stood up and left the box, taking charge of the proceedings. It had been a struggle to get Maitland there, and only my possession of the so-called gargoyle papers gave me the leverage to demand his presence. Now, seeing his cold dark eyes on me, I wondered if it had been the wisest course of action.

I began by holding up the tiny vial of poison that Sheriff Lens had seen Simmons throw away. "This, ladies and gentlemen, was the weapon used to murder Judge Bailey in this courtroom a few hours ago. Hydrocyanic acid—or to give it the more common name, prussic acid."

Tim Chaucer stirred uncomfortably at his desk, eyeing the empty pitcher. "Would you care to tell us, Mr. Simmons, how it came into your possession?"

The little lawyer was on his feet. "No, sir! I have nothing to say!"

"Thank you, Mr. Simmons." I turned back to Judge Maitland, directing my remarks to him. "Now, with your indulgence, I intend to demonstrate exactly how Justice Bailey could be poisoned in full view of the roomful of spectators."

"I trust the demonstration will not result in my becoming a stand-in victim," Maitland said grimly.

"There's nothing to fear," I told him, hoping it was true. "Now if the witness will take the stand exactly as he did this afternoon, we may proceed."

When Aaron Flavor was in the witness chair and Simmons was

poised in front of him, I continued. "Tim, please get the pitcher and fill it exactly as you did this afternoon."

Tim Chaucer rose reluctantly from his chair and approached the bench. He reached up for the empty glass pitcher, on its tray with the three glasses, as if he expected it to bite him. Then he took it and limped across the front of the courtroom to the water fountain. Every eye was on him, just as they had been earlier. He carefully filled the pitcher and returned to the bench with it, placing it on the tray.

"Thank you, Tim," I said. "You all saw it, ladies and gentlemen. Was there any chance he could have poisoned that pitcher without being noticed?"

"Not a chance," Sheriff Lens said from the front row. "Besides, I got the word there was no poison in the pitcher, only in the glass."

"As I suspected. Now how could the glass have been poisoned, and by whom? By Judge Bailey himself? No, this was obviously not a suicide. Yet *no one* but Bailey could have poisoned the glass after he poured water into it. We are faced with an impossibility, unless—" I left them hanging on my words for an instant as I unstopped the tiny vial and reached over to the tray of glasses. "Unless the poison was already in the glass."

Judge Maitland watched with widening eyes as I poured the contents of the vial into the glass by his elbow. It barely covered the bottom. "Invisible even from a few feet away, and if Bailey noticed it he'd have thought it was a little water—a melted ice cube, perhaps."

"But—" the sheriff started to protest.

"He only filled the glass halfway, so the poison still kept enough strength to kill. And Bailey never noticed the odor until it was too late."

"Then anyone could have poisoned the glass during the noon recess," Maitland said, perhaps concerned that I was shifting suspicion back to him.

"Anyone at all," I agreed. "And that's why it becomes so important to learn where Simmons obtained this vial of poison."

The lawyer looked uncertainly at the row of spectators. I lifted the pitcher and filled the glass halfway, as Judge Bailey had done. Then I walked past the lawyer to the railing and pointed toward a woman in the first row. "The poison was yours, Mrs. Jostrow, wasn't it?"

"I—" She tried to speak but couldn't. Then she stood up, as if

seeking escape, but Sheriff Lens was quickly at her side.

"Simmons found the poison and took it from you, didn't he?"

The lawyer started to protest, but Sarah Jostrow interrupted. "He's right. I wanted to kill myself after Walt's death. Mr. Simmons found the poison and took it away from me. But I swear he didn't have anything to do with the judge's death!"

"I know he didn't," I said. "I've demonstrated how the poison could have been in Bailey's glass before he added the water. But how many of you remember the exact sequence of the events you witnessed this afternoon? You see, the poison could have been in Judge Bailey's glass—except that it wasn't. The judge examined one glass, noticed a chip or crack in the rim, and set it aside. The glass he finally used—the glass which must have contained the poison in its bottom—was one of the two remaining glasses on the tray. One of the glasses nearest the witness stand."

Aaron Flavor turned to me as I spoke. "Are you saying the poison was meant for me?"

"Exactly, Mr. Flavor. Meant for you and supplied by you. While all our eyes were on Tim Chaucer filling his pitcher, you passed your hand over the glass and emptied the vial into it. You meant the poison for yourself, though when Bailey took your glass and filled it with water you kept silent. Why, Mr. Flavor? I suppose in that split second you were imagining a mistrial and some sort of freedom. There was always the chance you wouldn't be tried again. Bailey was drinking the poison meant for you, and you kept silent."

"That's crazy!" the defendant protested. "Where would I get a vial of poison?"

"You had a vial of poison and Sarah had one too. The implication is obvious—a suicide pact, in case you were found guilty."

"She never went near him!" Sheriff Lens protested. "How could she slip him a vial of poison?"

"As one of my fellow jurors observed, she was chewing gum during her testimony. And I noticed Aaron Flavor running his hand along the bottom of the witness stand in the same gesture she had used. She stuck the tiny vial to the bottom of the chair with gum, and Flavor retrieved it. While we watched Chaucer filling the pitcher, Flavor emptied the poison into the glass nearest him—and then allowed Judge Bailey to die in his place. No wonder Mrs. Jostrow was so distraught at the judge's death—she knew what must have happened!"

"The evidence of a suicide pact," Judge Maitland intoned from the

bench, "is certainly a strong presumption of guilt in the earlier death of Walt Jostrow. It can be used as evidence in the second trial."

"There won't be no second trial!" Aaron Flavor shouted, and scooped up the half-filled water glass, downing it before any of us could move. I think all the persons in the courtroom were frozen to their seats, waiting for the poison to claim its second victim.

But I shook my head and took the glass from his hand. "You won't escape justice that easily, Aaron. I emptied the second vial and refilled it with water."

"Well now (Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded), they held a second trial all right, and this time I wasn't on the jury. Aaron Flavor was convicted of murdering Walt Jostrow and sentenced to twenty years to life. That seemed to settle the matter, and they never did try him for letting Judge Bailey drink the poison he'd meant for himself. And Mrs. Jostrow changed her mind about committing suicide . . . You're leaving so soon? Another small—ah—libation before you go? And come back again—I'll tell you about the opening of the Northmont hospital and how Dr. Bob Yale became its first casualty."



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INDEX TO VOLUME SEVENTY-FIVE—JAN. 14-JUNE 30, 1980

ADAMS, T. M.: How I Became a Criminal	June 30	28
ASIMOV, ISAAC: 64 Million Trillion Combinations	May 5	6
The Man Who Pretended To Like Baseball	June 30	33
AVALLONE, MICHAEL: Crime Canapé	Mar. 10	59
BANKIER, WILLIAM: Dr. Temple Is Dead	Feb. 11	75
Events at Headland Cottage	June 30	47
BARTON, BILLY: The Final Verdict	Mar. 10	100
BARZUN, JACQUES: Five Clerihews	Jan. 14	30
BELL, D. O.: Safe and Free	Feb. 11	115
She Will Live Forever	Apr. 7	81
BIGWOOD, JAMES: The Light Dawns	May 5	101
Decisions, Decisions	June 30	78
BOLAND, JOHN C.: Bears Watching	Apr. 7	121
BOYLE, MARJORIE Q.: Cat's-Paw	Feb. 11	114
BREEN, JON L.: The Jury Box	Jan. 14-June 30	
Ruffles Versus Ruffles	June 2	39
BURANELLI, MARGUERITE: First Principle	Feb. 11	89
What's in a Name?	Feb. 11	89
Upward Mobility	Feb. 11	89
Tree Surgeon	Feb. 11	89
BUSH, GEOFFREY: The Last Meeting of the Butlers Club	Mar. 10	47
CALLAHAN, BARBARA: Hidden Springs	June 2	115
CHARLES, HAL: Sudden Death	Apr. 7	75
CHILDS, TIMOTHY: A Place To Grow	Jan. 14	116
CLERC, SJAAN: Perfectly Murderous	Mar. 10	24
Scuttlebutt?	May 5	101
COLLINS, DOROTHY A.: A Fish Story	Feb. 11	22
CREW, CAROLYN T.: Cui Bono?	Jan. 14	91
Nursery Crimes	Feb. 11	104
DAVIDSON, AUBREY: The Edinburgh Landlady	June 30	99
DEWEY, ANNE PERKINS: Spiderzan's Revenge	Apr. 7	69
DIRCKX, JOHN H.: Local Justice	June 2	47
DISTAD, AUDREE: Last Request	Jan. 14	69
FERRARS, E. X.: A Sense of Crisis	June 2	128
FISH, ROBERT L.: The Adventure of the Patient Resident	Feb. 11	80
Punishment To Fit the Crime	Apr. 7	22
The Adventure of the Belles Letters	June 30	100
GILBERT, MICHAEL: The M Route	Apr. 7	131
GRENIER, MARK: Net Loss	Apr. 7	28
Mixed Review	Apr. 7	92
Facing the Music	May 5	101
Brought to Light	June 2	53
Corpus Delectable	June 30	56
HIGHSMITH, PATRICIA: Things Had Gone Badly	Mar. 10	64

(continued on page 162)

INDEX TO VOLUME SEVENTY-FIVE—JAN. 14-JUNE 30, 1980

(continued from page 161)

HOCH, EDWARD D.: Interpol: The Case of the Straw Serpent	Jan. 14	143
The Theft of the Banker's Ashtray	Feb. 11	143
The Case of the Chloroformed Clerics	Mar. 10	144
The Weapon Out of the Past	Apr. 7	5
The Most Dangerous Man Alive	May 5	135
The Spy Who Came Back from the Dead	June 2	145
The Problem of the Courthouse Gargoyle	June 30	140
HOLDING, JAMES: Half a Loaf	May 5	30
HOWARD, CLARK: Horn Man	June 2	54
HUGHES, RILEY: Crime of Omission	June 2	11
Grand Opening	June 30	73
JOCHMANS, BETTY: The Glass Slipper Murder	Feb. 11	97
JOHNSON, SHARON: Twilight	Feb. 11	103
KEATING, H. R. F.: The Locked Bathroom	June 2	66
LAUS, WILLIAM F.: Welcome to Westfield	Jan. 14	76
LUZZATTO, JACK: Fill in the Dashes	Apr. 7	91
MCCONNELL, CHARLES R.: Like Father Like Son	June 30	85
MAILER, NORMAN: The Locust Cry	Mar. 10	101
MARLOWE, DAN J.: The Girl Who Sold Money	June 2	85
MARTIN, RUSSELL: The Literary Bookmaker	Mar. 10	60
MASTERSON, WHIT: Seek Him in Shadows	Mar. 10	25
MOSES, E. P.: Death Angel	Mar. 10	79
Graveyard Shift	June 30	79
MOYES, PATRICIA: A Suitable Revenge	Jan. 14	137
The Most Hated Man in London	Mar. 10	132
A Man Without Papers	May 5	126
NATSUKI, SHIZUKO: The Pawnshop Murder	May 5	75
NEVINS, JR., FRANCIS M.: The Other Man in the Pinstripe	May 5	56
NOONAN, MAUREEN: Just One of Those Days	May 5	91
OELRICH, MICHAEL J.: Do It Yourself	Jan. 14	82
OLSON, DONALD: Web of Circumstance	Apr. 7	93
O'SPELIN, MACLEAN: Arabian Nights in Fez	Feb. 11	8
PARRY, HENRY T.: Jury Duty	Apr. 7	47
The Turning Point	June 30	109
PATRICK, KATHERINE: One Thing I Can't Remember	May 5	67
PENTECOST, HUGH: The Last Full Measure	Jan. 14	45
Jericho and the Cardboard Box	Apr. 7	106
PENZLER, OTTO: Crime Dossier	Jan. 14-June 30	
PEROWNE, BARRY: Raffles in Love	Feb. 11	124
Raffles and the Artful Dodger	June 2	12
POLK, JACK: On the CB	Feb. 11	105
PRONZINI, BILL: Times Change	Feb. 11	4
Two Weeks Every Summer	June 2	5
RENDELL, RUTH: The Paintbox Houses	Mar. 10	6
A Case of Coincidence	June 30	5

(continued on page 32)

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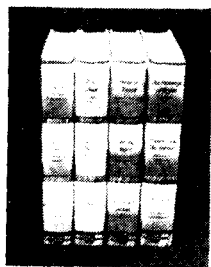
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